

Pugs at Work: Bodily Capital and Bodily Labour Among Professional Boxers*

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One of the paradoxical features of recent social studies of the body is how rarely one encounters in them actual living bodies of flesh and blood. The books that have appeared in recent years on the topic rightly bemoan the suppression of the body in sociology and its commodification in society (Glassner, 1988), elaborate analytical typologies of its social government (Turner, 1984), ponder the duality of its physical and communicative dimensions (O'Neill, 1985), or deploy exegeses of its treatment in recent, especially French, cultural theory (e.g., Martin, 1990: 13–80), but typically offer precious few insights into the actual practices and representations that constitute the human body as a 'ongoing practical achievement,' to borrow an expression of Garfinkel's.¹ Its rapid growth and extreme dispersion notwithstanding (Berthelot et al., 1985; Frank, 1990), the newer sociology of the body has paid surprisingly little focused attention to the diverse ways in which specific social worlds invest, shape, and deploy human bodies and to the concrete incorporating practices whereby their social structures are effectively embodied by the agents who partake of them.²

This article purports to address this gap by way of an ethnographic inquiry into the social structuring of bodily capital and bodily labor among professional fighters in an American metropolis. It explores how practitioners of a particular bodily craft (boxing), most of whom are embedded in a social setting that puts a high premium on physical force and prowess (the contemporary black ghetto), conceive of, care for, and rationalize — in both Weber's and Freud's sense — the use of their body as a *form of capital*. It is based on an ethnography of a boxing gym and on participant observation of the daily lifeworld of boxers conducted over a four-year period on the South Side of Chicago. It draws on three main types of data: my field notes and personal experiences as an apprentice-boxer who learned the trade *in situ*, eventually acquiring sufficient proficiency in it to enter the Chicago Golden Gloves tournament and to spar on a regular basis with professional fighters (Wacquant, 1989, 1991); in-depth interviews with fifty

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professional pugilists and over three dozen coaches, managers, and assorted members of the guild such as 'cutmen,' referees, and matchmakers active in the Greater Chicagoland area; and specialized publications, reports from the boxing press, and the (auto)biographies of champions and renowned trainers.³

Bodily Capital

Walk into a boxing gym and you cannot but be struck by the sight and sounds of bodies everywhere and enraptured by the strange, ballet-like spectacle they offer, gliding across the ring, colliding and clinching, feet squealing on the thick blue mat, or moving back and forth in measured steps in front of a mirror, shadow-boxing in pursuit of an invisible opponent, circling heavy bags hung from the ceiling, punching speed bags as if in imitation of a machine-gun, or rhythmically skipping rope and folding in half for endless series of sit-ups, all in unison, the washboard abdominals, chiseled torsos and cut-up quadriceps, sculptured backs, tight behinds and thighs, and the grimacing faces glistening with sweat: so many visible indices of the bodily labor that makes up the trade of the pugilist. On the walls, posters exhibiting the hardened, trim, taut physique of champions are there for everyone to admire, silent models that offer, in stereotypic poses, fists clenched and muscles flexed, a championship belt strapped across the shoulder or around the waist, living yardsticks to measure oneself by.

To say that pugilism is a body-centered universe is an understatement. As Joyce Carol Oates (1987: 5) perceptively noted, 'like a dancer, a boxer 'is' his body, and is totally identified with it.' Fighters feel and know this equation well, for their organism is indeed the template and epicentre of their life, at once the site, the instrument and the object of their daily work, the medium and the outcome of their occupational exertion — 'that's your asset: you know, without your body you're not gonna accomplish many things,' whispers one of my gym mates as he wraps his hands in the dressing room.⁴ And their whole existence is consumed by its servicing, moulding, and purposeful manipulation. If, following Pierre Bourdieu (1986: 241), we define capital as

accumulated labor (in its materialized form or its 'incorporated', embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor,

then we may conceive boxers as holders of and even *entrepreneurs in bodily capital*⁵ of a particular kind; and the boxing gym in which they spend much of their waking time as a social machinery designed to convert this 'abstract' bodily capital into *pugilistic capital*, that is, to impart to the fighter's body a set of

abilities and tendencies liable to produce value in the field of professional boxing in the form of recognition, titles, and income streams. One sparring partner whom I asked why he had decided to 'turn pro' had this striking reply: 'It was just a small black kid tryin' to open his own business with his fists.'

The fighter's body is simultaneously his means of production, the raw materials he and his handlers (trainer and manager) have to work with and on, and, for a good part, the somatized product of his past training and extant mode of living. *Bodily capital and bodily labor are thus linked by a recursive relation* which makes them closely dependent on one another. The boxer uses what Marx (1977: 173) calls 'the natural forces of his body' to 'appropriate' that particular part of nature that is his own body so as to optimize the growth of these very forces. Properly managed, this body is capable of producing more value than was 'sunk' in it. But for that it is necessary for the fighter to know its intrinsic limits, to expand its sensorimotor powers, and to resocialize its physiology in accordance with the specific requirement and temporality of the game. In addition, the fighter's body is a system of signs, a symbolic quilt that he must learn to decipher in order better to enhance and protect it, but also to attack it. For what is unique about boxing is that the boxer's body is both the weapon of assault and the target to be destroyed.

First, much like fixed capital and like all living organisms, the body of fighters has inherent structural limitations, including a limited life expectancy. As famed trainer-manager and founder of Detroit's Kronk gym Emanuel Steward put it, 'the human body is like an automobile. It's got so many miles on it and that's it' (in Halpern, 1988: 278). Boxers have an acute sense of dependency on their body and of its temporal finitude: 'I see my body as (chuckle) *my life*, somethin' I gotta really *tone down*, you know, to be perfect' says a hopeful contender in the lightweight division; 'you have to take care of yer body — once you destroy yer body, (sternly) you can hang it up,' adds a rising middleweight who recently moved to the city's far South Side. This explains that boxers must carefully manage the investment of their physical assets over time (Wacquant, 1989: 62–67): they should stay in the amateur ranks long enough to gain experience but not so long that they wear themselves down and get 'frozen' into the amateur mould; they must constantly push themselves in training and stay in tip-top shape in case a fight is offered to them on short notice (as a last-minute substitute for another injured boxer, for instance) but beware of 'burnout' or getting hurt in the gym; they should, to the extent that they can (i.e., that they are protected by an influential manager or promoter), postpone or space out tough fights against 'serious customers' — it may take but one brutal 'beating' for a given fighter to deplete his capacity for absorbing blows and to become 'shot.' Pugilistic obsolescence is described in terms of the erosion of the body and the guild has evolved an extensive vocabulary to designate boxers who keep stepping

into the ring despite the obvious deterioration of their bodily capital: a fighter who is 'washed up' is known as a 'punching bag' or, more cruelly, as 'dead meat.'⁶

From the time he first steps into a gym till the day he 'hangs up' his gloves and retires from the trade, the body of the boxer is the focus of unremitting attention. The first thing that the coach of the Stoneland Boys Club, a highly regarded trainer of over five decades who was my mentor, pays notice to when a new recruit walks in his back-room to sign up is the physical 'hardware' he brings in with him, the brute matter he will have to chisel and develop: his height, weight (which he can visually estimate within a couple of pounds) and the volume as well as shapes of his body, square or round, straight or curved, its deportment and motility, stiff and rigid or relaxed and supple, the size of his neck and wrists, the form of his nose and eye sockets. Often I heard him lecture on how blessed Muhammad Ali was to have had the bodily assets he did, including a granite jaw, a snake-slow pulse that enabled him to summon enormous spurts of energy and to recover from punches with unusual celerity, a round face that would not swell and allowed for great peripheral vision, and the excellent skin that did not cut, unlike that of his archrival Joe Frazier whose face would turn into a messy pulp in the course of their furious clashes.

Tale of the Tape		
How Evander Holyfield and Riddick Bowe measure up:		
	HOLYFIELD	BOWE
Age	30	25
Weight	205	235
Height	6-2	6-5
Reach	77½	81
Chest (normal)		
	43	46
Chest (expanded)		
	45	50
Biceps	16	17
Forearm	12½	12½
Wrist	7½	8
Fist	12½	13½
Neck	19½	17½
Waist	32	36
Thigh	22	26½
Calf	13	16½
Record	28-0	31-0
Knockouts	22	27

Document 1 'Tale of the Tape': The official valuation of bodily capital before the Holyfield/Bowe heavyweight world title fight, *New York Times*, November 13, 1992

Just like the proverbial ‘tale of the tape’ shown before every major televised bout (see Document 1 above), the detailed evaluation of top pugilists which is a standard fare of boxing magazines always includes separate measurements and ratings of their different physical attributes, stamina, power (ability to knock opponents out), and ‘chin’ (capacity to withstand power punches to the head). Judgements boil down to an appreciation of strategic bodily parts such as the face, hands, arms, and feet (for their speed and swiftness). The inherited somatic endowment (notably the muscular-skeletal structure) of a fighter is of particular concern because it largely selects the style and ring strategy he must adopt by predefining the tools he will have to work with on offence and defence alike. Thin and lanky pugilists tend to become what the occupational lingo calls ‘boxers,’ that is, stylists who fight from a distance, using reach, speed, and technique to maintain their opponents at bay so as to pile up points or create an opening for a knock-out strike from long range. Shorter, stubby fighters with large, strong upper bodies, on the other hand, will generally be ‘fighters’ (also known as ‘sluggers’ or ‘brawlers’) who have to walk inside — or through — the punches of their opponents to wear them down by means of repeated body attacks and short blows to the head from up close. This fit between bodily capital and style is suggested in this excerpt from a gym conversation in which a noted manager talks about a tall and filiform fighter known for his quickness and reach but lacking in body strength:

Manager: Jay can fight a guy like T. [current champion] who isn’t physical, he could do alright with. I don’t know how well he does with a *tough* guy that’s gonna come, keep a lot of pressure on him. I think he’s gonna have *problems*, ‘cause I don’t see him gettin’ strong either. You know that you’re not strong: you are what you are. You can only do so many things. A short guy can’t stretch himself and all of a sudden become a tall guy.

LW: (laughing) Yeah, that’s what Ronnie [a fighter sparring in the ring in front of us] was saying.

Manager: An’ that’s the thing, Ronnie is very *short*. He’s too, he’s *way* too short for his weight [5’5" for 140 pounds]. But he’s *tough*. Tough, rugged, *very* tough guy. So, he somewhat *compensates* in that way. That’s what he’s got to do. An’ Ronnie’d be in bad shape if he’s gonna stand back an’ try to *box* somebody. He’s got to keep pressure because there’s no other way for him to uh, to *fight*. There’s nothin’ else for him to do but be rough, tough, aggressive guy. Only way he can do it. (. . .)

LW: So really the body you have limits . . .

Manager: It determines to a great degree what you’ve got. The only thing you can do with things like that, you’ve gotta try, take a kid like

that, an' teach him how to *slip* punches as such as not to get *bit* with everything comin' in. But he's got to um . . . he's basically got to be an aggressive guy, comin' in throwin' hooks an' big punches because that's *all* he can do. His style is going to negate him doing anything else.

LW: Do you sometimes get guys that have the build of a brawler but they want to stand back and box?

Manager: That's right, that's right. An' it don't work. A lotta times fighters don't fight the *style* that *their bodies say they should*. You have exceptions to all the rules.

Style, in turn, impinges on longevity: as a rule, sluggers (or counter-punchers) have shorter careers than boxers (or 'boxer-punchers') because of the much greater 'wear and tear' that their body sustains in the squared circle. But anatomy is not destiny. We must not forget that the human organism, far from being the unchangeable biological integument of the self, is an 'active, self-transforming subject' (Freund, 1988: 851). The body is unlike most instruments of production in its degree of flexibility; it can, within given parameters, be refurbished, retooled, and significantly restructured. Even basic physiological processes, such as our respiratory system and our blood pressure, are subject to social influences (Buytendjik, 1974) and many of the fundamental metabolic and homeostatic mechanisms of our organism can be purposefully modified through intensive training (Arsac, 1992). The gym is a social factory for remaking human bodies into virtual 'fighting machines.' Says a veteran trainer from a South Side gym: 'I like creatin' a monster, jus' see what you can create . . . like the master Frankenstein: I created a monster, I got a fighter, I created a good fighter, same difference.'

Body Work

The body can be significantly remodelled first in terms of its volume and shape. Every boxing aficionado is cognizant of the mutation of light-heavyweight champion Michael Spinks who bulked up from 170 to 200 pounds for his takeover of the world heavyweight crown in 1985 by sculpting what was in effect 'a new body' (Oates, 1987: 7). Thanks to a specially designed regimen of sprint workouts, aerobic exercises and food — three 5,500-calorie meals a day, rich in carbohydrates and protein, supplemented by a mix of vitamins, minerals, glucose polymers and amino acids — Spinks put on 30 pounds in a short seven months, yet his body fat percentage went *down* from 10 to 7.2 (Cassidy 1991: 36). Most novices go in the other direction, quickly losing an unexpectedly large number of pounds, even though they simultaneously gain muscle mass. I entered the gym weighing what I took to be an athletic 150 pounds only to discover that my 'fight weight' stood between 130 and 135 lbs.

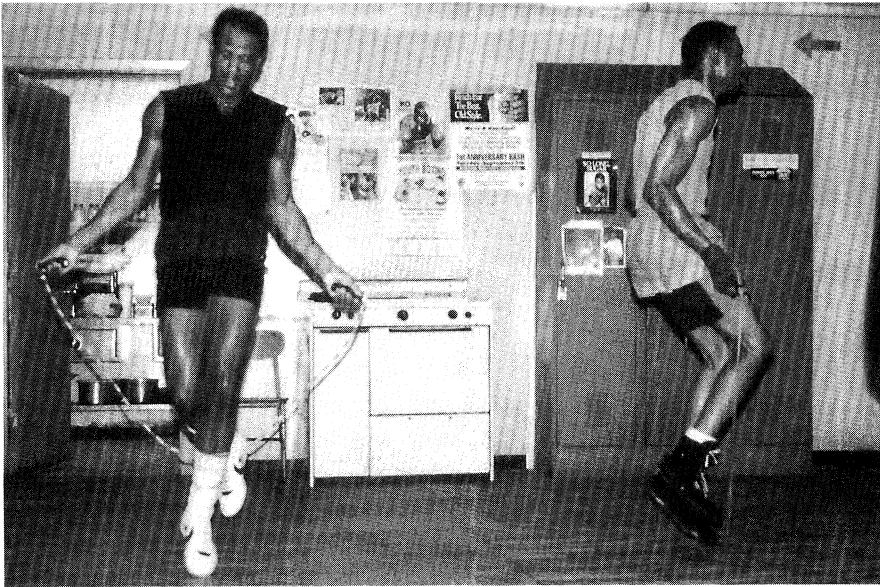


Figure 1 Club fighters must continually maintain themselves in tip-top shape to be physically ready to take a fight on short notice

Boxers also build a specific muscular armor through drills that enable them to reinforce and expand those parts of their body that they need most for protection (shoulders, abdominals, biceps), endurance, and punching power. However, apart from a few specific exercises, such as neck tractions with a loaded head-guard to thicken their neck so as to better withstand the torque of punches or pressing styrofoam balls in the palm of their hands, the statuesque physique of fighters is the result of the immutable workout that composes the boxer's preparation the world over: running, shadow-boxing, punching an assortment of bags or pads held by a trainer, skipping rope, calisthenics, and sparring. Contrary to what is commonly believed, boxers do not 'pump iron;' trainers are almost universally dead-set against weightlifting which they argue makes fighters 'muscle-bound' and impairs their hand speed, resilience, and agility. And, of course, the pugilist's body is further reshaped by fighting itself, through injuries and the normal 'wear and tear' that comes with being hit repeatedly. One day, after a particularly lively sparring session during which I withstood the aggressive attacks of my partner, my coach remarked: 'Your hooter don't bleed or don't get red no more like it used to. . . You're beginning to look like a real fighter, Louie.'¹⁷

Most boxers relish working *with* their body and *on* their body and they come to enjoy the strenuous exertion entailed by their workout in spite of its extremely monotonous and reiterant character. A light-heavyweight who moon-

lights as a part-time security officer compares preparing for a bout with 'moldin' clay':

You see parts of your body jus' startin' to develop . . . you feel the *pain* that you feelin' jus' go away (snaps his fingers). Y'know, all that, jus' like *shbooo!* You feel fresh, your oxygen, I mean, everything be like *wow!* You ready, you feel like you can hit a *steel wall* or somethin'.

To acquire the specific *bodily sensitivity* that makes one a competent pugilist is a slow and protracted process; it cannot be effected by an act of will or a conscious transfer of information. It necessitates, rather, an imperceptible embodiment of the mental and corporeal schemata immanent in pugilistic practice that admits of no discursive mediation or systematization (Wacquant, 1992a). This progressive bodily self-transformation is akin to a process of sedimentation whereby the practical mastery of the actional gestalts constitutive of pugilism slowly 'seeps into one's organismic ground' (Leder, 1990: 32). It takes time for the fighter's body to remake itself and 'mature' to the game: most trainers agree that to produce a seasoned amateur requires around four years and to fully (re)learn the game as a professional another three.

This is because boxing is a full-body sport that requires that virtually every sense and muscle be trained to execute properly and to withstand the gruelling ordeal of the fight. For example, while shadow-boxing on his own the boxer must constantly monitor every part of his body and synchronize a large number of movements, the placement, orientation and spacing of his feet, his balance and muscular tension, and the course, height, speed and position of his hands, elbows and chin, all the while visualizing an opponent firing punches at him in a rapid-fire succession of offensive and defensive moves. The instructions given by a trainer to a young welterweight going through the motions alone in the ring are worth quoting *in extenso* because the continuous stream they form gives an idea of the intensity of the body work involved in this deceptively simple-looking drill:

Turn this shoulder, come on, keep the chin in, step in with the jab, step in with the jab, chin's too high, gimme a good slot, gimme a good slot, come on, keep them hands up, keep them hands up. That's it, slip inside, never stay still, never stay still, circlin', circlin' all the time, *that's the jab I want*, up off that jab, up punch off that jab an' hook off that jab, turn the shoulder, turn your ass, turn your hand when you hit 'im, all I want is to put 'em all together, come on. That's alright, work it out, it'll get hot, the more you work the better it gets. Balance, when you throw three or four, you should be able to throw four or five more, that's balance, sit down more, sit down more, relax, no big thing. Come on, snap, *snap the punch, snap*, short an' snappy, inside

his arms, stay inside his arms. That's it snappy, step in with — step in with the punches, get under, over when you throw that right hand, don't lead with the right hand, come on, that's it come back with it — any time you throw a right hand, *defense, work!* Come on, come on, set yourself an' punch, hit his spots, hit the body an' come to the head, body an' head, he goes down, come up with uppercuts, come on, keep it up, keep the left hand up, you're droppin' the left hand, pick it up, elbows in, don't give him no target, keep slippin, keep slippin' an' weavin', slippin' an' weavin', always movin', always on balance, circle, circle, *that's the pivotin'!* I like the pivotin', anytime he leans on you pivot an' get his weight goin' forward an' snap, snap, snap, snap the punches, that's it, come on, shoulder, put your behind an' your hands, turn 'em all, turn right, snap-snap, two hands, two hands. (Louder) Thirty seconds! Open it up, *open it up!* Come on son, work it up, that's it, keep your balance, always be in command, make him fight your fight, that's it, do what you want with him, lead him around, lead him around, throw that right hand hook, that's it! (suddenly dropping the tempo) *Time!* Okay shake it out, an' let's get our sit-ups. 'Bout two hundred sit-ups Lennie, let's go, don't drink that, spit it out.

What we may call *body work* — by analogy with Arlie Hochschild's (1979) notion of 'emotion work' — thus consists of a highly intensive and finely regulated manipulation of the organism whose aim is to imprint into the bodily schema of the fighter postural sets, patterns of movement, and subjective emotional-cognitive states that make him into a conversant practitioner of the Sweet science of bruising. It is a form of 'practical labor' in that it 'involves the exercise of an intelligence that comes into its own in communication with the concrete and actual realities of its natural setting' and object (Bittner, 1983: 253). And it practically reorganizes the entire corporeal field of the fighter, bringing to prominence certain organs and abilities and making others recede, transforming not only the physique of the boxer but also his 'body-sense,' the consciousness he has of his organism and, through this changed body, of the world about him.

Just as they learn to know and monitor the interior of their own bodies, boxers learn to assess their opponent's body through a reading of its outer surface. The latter is the topic of a complex symptomatology aimed at revealing its past performances and at diagnosing its present condition and potential. For the body of every fighter is like a living 'fieldnote' (Jackson, 1990) on his entire career: it bears the visible traces of his pugilistic trajectory in the form of scar tissue and cuts, marks, welts, hematomas, and bone fractures. Is it not said of a fighter who gets hit at will during a bout that he is 'getting tattooed'? Before a fight, boxers or their handlers methodically size up the body of their adversary of the day, trying to detect on it the indices of possible weaknesses to exploit. A

'soft' midsection is a candidate for immediate body attacks; cuts that have not healed properly and might be easily reopened will draw special attention. During a bout, if one boxer starts to bleed from a cut over the eye for instance, the other will systematically aim for that eye in an attempt to further open the wound, in the hope that the referee or ring doctor eventually stops the contest on injury.

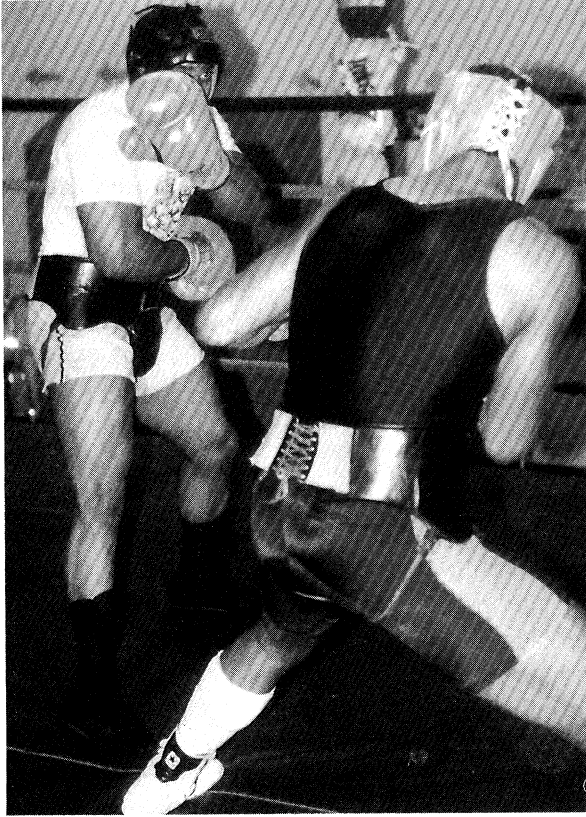


Figure 2 Through regular sparring, boxers learn and fine-tune ring moves and techniques that effect a thorough reorganization of their perceptual, physical, and emotional abilities and propensities

Every well-schooled boxer knows the 'pressure points' of the body that he must simultaneously protect (when they are his) and strike at (those of his opponent): the point of the chin, the tip of the nose, the cheekbone, a spot just above the temple and behind the ear where nerve centers are located, the solar plexus, under the heart, the liver and the kidneys. Every good trainer will teach his charges the art of 'working the body', i.e., pounding the sides of the opponent's abdomen and thorax to wear him down (hard body punches cause trauma

to the internal organs that lasts several days), ‘taking his legs’ from under him and forcing him to lower his guard, before going ‘upstairs’ for the knock-out punch, in illustration of the well-known boxing adage: ‘Kill the body and the head will die.’⁸ Once in the ring, a fighter must also be capable of evaluating in a flash the bodily assets possessed by his opponent. In the first seconds of the opening round, explains a world-ranked welterweight, ‘I try to feel him out an’ see if he can take what I got. Blockin’ punches, you can always tell if a guy is a hard puncher.’ The next step is to tailor one’s strategy to take advantage of the opponent’s physical strengths and weaknesses.

Finally, the body is the key resource that boxers dispose of for purposes of ‘impression management’ (Goffman, 1969). Its display and adornment are central to the strategies that fighters construct to instill apprehension and doubt in their adversary or to capture the media’s attention and the public’s fancy. Some fighters shave their head (or stop shaving for weeks) to appear meaner; others don elaborate robes, trunks, tassels, and stage costumes or sport custom-made haircuts sending unambiguous messages: ‘WAR,’ ‘TKO,’ ‘KILLER,’ or the more prosaic ‘Say No To Drugs.’ Sonny Liston was known to wear big boots and to stuff his robes with towels to appear bigger than he was. Muhammad Ali’s trainer always made sure that the entourage of ‘The Greatest’ included only short men so that Ali would never fail to ‘project a huge look’ (Anderson, 1991: 66).

Sacrifice

You gonna have a lotta good fighters that never have the *sense* to sacrifice — they roadwork right, train right, and they don’t make it. You got more *good* fighters that don’t make it than you have guys that *do*. Not that they don’t have the ability but they don’t want to *sacrifice* they eatin’, they don’t wanna get up in the mornin’ and run, they don’t wanna leave the ladies alone when its time: I don’t care how much ability he’s got, (didactic tone) he’s not gonna make it. Tha’s first part, like I say is *discipline*, if you’rn’t disciplined in mind *and body*, you don’t make a fighter.

As this quote from the trainer of the Stoneland Boys Club suggests, the notion of sacrifice stands at the core of the occupational belief system of professional pugilism.⁹ It provides the organizing principle of the daily routine of its practitioners, both in and out of the gym, and anchors the entire moral economy of the specific universe. Sacrifice implies first and foremost the constant stewardship of key bodily functions — nutrition, sleeping and resting, sexual intercourse (especially the discharge of semen and other bodily fluids) — that affect, or are believed to affect, the fructification of corporeal capital and the preparedness of the fighter’s body for battle.

The notion of sacrifice encapsulates a world vision in which one must pay with one's body for everything that one gets: 'you don't gain anything without a sacrifice' admonishes a referee and former fighter; 'if a guy really want to box and be a fighter, he's a *clean liver*,' seconds a manager. Sacrifice is tantamount to a form of secular bodily asceticism, that is, to paraphrase Max Weber (1958: 172) well-known analysis in the *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, the methodical and rational subjection of individual impulse and desire to the pursuit of pugilistic excellence through 'restless, continuous, systematic work' with and upon the body. Thus we must include under the general rubric of body work the entire gamut of rituals of restraint and everyday routines of oblation designed to establish rulership over the body and to reorganize the whole of the life of the fighter around the need to guarantee peak bodily performance.

Because it 'becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive and a subjected body' (Foucault, 1979: 26), the fighter's physique becomes a veritable colony of the self that must be thoroughly subjugated and methodically developed. 'Dedication,' 'discipline,' 'giving up everything,' 'commitment,' 'doing the right thing,' 'keeping clean,' all these expressions refer not only to bodily labour in the gym but also to the regulated practices of abstinence in the three areas that form what we may call the *trinity of pugilistic sacrifice*, namely, food, social life, and sex. Not surprisingly, these are, in descending order, the three items most often mentioned by boxers when asked what is the greatest sacrifice they have to consent in anticipation of a fight.

Boxers compete in predefined weight classes and have a vested interest in fighting at the upper limit of the lowest weight category that their body can reach without sapping its strength (with the partial exception of the three upper weight divisions, due to the scarcity of heavyweight fighters and to the greater media visibility and bigger purses this division enjoys). For instance, a boxer campaigning in the welterweight division (140 to 147 lbs) should step in the ring exactly at or just under 147 pounds. If he tips the scale above the required weight on the morning of the fight, he will have to shed the excess pounds right on the spot — much to the glee of his opponent — or forfeit participation in the event altogether, thereby annulling weeks of toilsome preparation (unless his rival agrees to let him fight above the set weight, often for extra monetary compensation). If he comes in too low, on the other hand, say at 143 lbs, he will likely give away several pounds to his opponent and put himself at a decided disadvantage. Because their 'fight weight' is, as a rule, well below their 'walking-around weight,' pugilists are engaged in a nagging guerrilla with food. For many, the culinary observances necessary to keep 'in shape' are the most difficult requirement of the training regimen. When I asked him what was the hardest thing in the life of the professional fighter, a white light-heavyweight who works part-time as a truck driver exclaimed:

I'd have to say eatin' too, the food, keep away . . . Shi', I'm from a' Italian fam'ly, you got to see how my mother cooks. It's unbelievable! (jubilant) I come over on Sundays and it's like, they'll have pasta and meatballs and neckbones an' everythin' an' I can have *jus' a lil'* bowl of pasta and I gotta *leave* real quick 'cause I'll start eatin' everythin' and tha's prob'ly, tha's prob'ly hardes'.

To the extent that they can afford it and that their personal life are stable enough, boxers preparing for a bout follow a strict diet of white meats (roasted chicken and turkey) and fish, steamed vegetables, fruits, tea or water; fried dishes, sugar, bread, milk, and 'pop' (believed to 'stick to the sides' of the body) are to be avoided like a plague. They go on for weeks lusting their favorite foods, be it watermelon, ice-cream or cheeseburgers: 'It's like bein' a pregnant lady, you know, *cravin' for everythin'* at the *wrong time*, it's *bar'*!' Proper eating is so important that many trainers per force become first-rate cooks and lay dieticians in order to better supervise the food intake of those of their fighters who have career prospects or contend at the national and world level (e.g., Anderson, 1991: 98, 190–191). Following such draconian diets while exercising intensely entails tremendous psychological suffering, comparable to that experienced by bodybuilders in the final weeks of their preparation, when they train the hardest with blood sugar levels so low that they undercut the body's natural defences against pain (Levine, 1991: 214).

Ideally, proper training, resting, and dieting should allow the fighter to lose weight progressively with the goal of hitting the contractually agreed-upon target exactly on (the eve of) the day of the event. In many cases, however, things do not go as smoothly and it becomes necessary to starve oneself in the final weeks and days to 'make the weight.' It is not rare for fighters to shed up to six pounds and more within forty-eight hours of the weigh-in, a feat accomplished by means of prolonged steam baths, running or skipping rope with a vinyl 'sweat suit' on or by shadowboxing besides a running hot shower dressed in heavy sweaters, as well as by halting all food intake for days and sucking on lemons. Another common practice is to 'dry out' on the days leading to the fight, that is, to stop ingesting fluids. It is a rare boxer who has never experienced the agony of going hungry and of training with his mouth so dry that he can barely move his tongue in it. The ostensive purpose of 'drying out' is to reduce weight momentarily, yet it also clearly functions as a technique of mortification or purification of the body. Proof is the fact that some pugilists willingly deprive themselves of drink on the eve of the fight even when they are not overweight because this has become part of the routine whereby they get physically and mentally 'attuned' for the bout.¹⁰

This is the appropriate place to recall that the word diet derives from the Latin *diata* meaning 'mode of living' (Turner, 1982: 254–255). For boxers fast

not simply in terms of bodily intake but in every aspect of their life: 'You live the life of a hermit' avers a referee; 'the training is actually not in the gym but outside of the gym,' concurs one of his colleagues. Sacrifice penetrates deep into the boxer's personal life, so deep indeed that it effaces the divide between the private and the public, the gym and the home, the ring and the bedroom, as his entire existence, down to the tiniest details, becomes subordinated to the imperative of care and accumulation of bodily capital. First, training swallows away much of the boxer's day with the result that he finds it difficult to spend time with his spouse and children. Second, the rigors of training demand that the body be adequately and regularly rested. Up at five in the morning to do his daily 'roadwork,' the fighter must be in bed early and get a full eight hours of sleep every night in order not to be worn down by his workout and weight loss. This means that he cannot go out with friends or have guests at home and only rarely attends parties. This regimen defines a 'lifestyle not far removed from that of an armchair,' reminiscent of that of the 'Iron Man' described by Connell (1990: 86), which renders family life rather impractical and can become the source of domestic strain:

The life of a fighter isn't for a woman period, because it's so awkward and it's so demanding and it's not for any woman to be with a guy talkin' 'bout goin' to bed early, gittin' up early, can't go out. A woman doesn't need a guy like that to be married with. It's not a normal life. Put it like that: *it's not a normal life*. (black supermiddleweight, 32, firefighter)

Some boxers try to isolate themselves from the temptation of 'normal' social intercourse by living off on their own, or by removing themselves from their familiar environment in the days leading to the fight. The elite of the pugilistic corps, those fighting at the top of the world rankings for purses large enough to warrant the extra expenses, spend the final weeks of preparation before the bout in the seclusion of this peculiar institution concocted for the intensive protection and proliferation of corporeal capital that is the 'training camp.' Current middleweight titlist 'Terrible' Terry Norris lives and trains in a remote ranch in the California desert five days of the week and goes back home to his wife and children only on week-ends. One Chicago fighter who took the step of moving in with his old trainer, in whose house his manager rents a room for him, explains:

[Living alone with my trainer] helps a lot, because it keeps me in line, you know. Every once in a while I wanna slip, he don' let me, you know. Tha's good, because, you have, you gonna have to sacrifice a lot

to be a boxer an' if I'mma sacrifice, I might as well *totally* sacrifice myself an' stay with my trainer.

Q: What is it that you have to sacrifice?

A: You know, no women, no drinkin', you know, no partyin', no hangin' out the streets. Certain foods you have to eat, you know. So I mean, it's — it's, it's a real hard sacrifice, you know, 'cause you can't really... *no personal life*. You don't really have a personal life, so tha's the sacrifice. (black cruiserweight, 20, supported by manager)

Yet for many professional boxers the most difficult, if not downright distressing, aspect of their trade is the dictate to desist from sexual activity and companionship. From the ascetic point of view, sexuality is, like eating, a gross activity of the body that circumvents the regulation of desire by way of routines (Turner, 1984: 16–18, 163–165).¹¹ This explains that many coaches, particularly in 'blood' or contact sports such as American football (e.g., Sabo and Panequinto, 1990: 120), advise their athletes to avoid sexual relations for a couple days prior to games. In the case of boxers, however, trainers hold that they need to 'chill out' and refrain from intercourse for *several weeks before a bout* (from two to eight depending on its length and expected ferociousness) in order to conserve their full strength. The majority of boxers try to — or claim to — abide by the rule but do so at the cost of considerable frustration:

Q: What is it that you dislike most about the training, about the life of the professional boxer?

A: *Sacrifice of stayin' away from my wife*, when I you know, I mean, (laughing in embarrassment) I don' wanna soun' y'know freaky or anythin', but sure you get *horny*. I'm sure *everybody* get horny, I mean, *you human*. You know, you get horny an' *man!* It's, jus' knowin' that y'know, yo' wife is layin' next to ya an' it's *no-no-no*. (laughs a bit) An' you wanna say 'come on!' Naw! (laughs more) I mean, you know, an' that's, I mean, tha's the worse part about it. (29, black bantam-weight, custodian)

Based on a 'profane physiology' (Durif, 1992) that ascribes to a variety of sexual acts — from masturbation to actual intercourse — a range of adverse consequences on various bodily parts and processes, trainers expressly warn fighters about the need to 'keep clean' on that count: 'I tell them, I say "stay away from your girlfriend", I jus' try to, you know make a joke out of it, I go "hey! keep you hands clean!".' One coach further expounds: 'If you went with a woman an' you should have sex or intercourse or somethin', the next day you're like real contented an' you ain't got that uh, *snap* in your punches or nothin' an' it, it jus'

like makes you too relaxed.’ ‘It weakens you, see what I mean, the legs an’ you know sex, it’s, it’s *nerves*, see it weakens you,’ continues a third. Yet another trainer revealed to me that he secretly instructed his top fighters to refrain from having sex *after* a tough fight for fear that they would sustain . . . brain damage from this extra sensual exertion at a time when their body needs to recuperate. Here again, interestingly, the body ‘will tell’ on the fighter if he has not behaved properly. Most trainers believe they can detect a breach of the pugilistic sexual code by such physical evidence as the trembling of the fighter’s legs or his breathing pattern:

Yes, I can usually tell when he fooled around or if he drank a little or if he had some women, I can tell by the workout, by *the way his body acts*. . . I tell him, I don’t like that, ‘cause I’m puttin’ in my best an’ I want him to put his best in, an’ it’s sacrificin’, if you want the big money an’ you wanna be a champion, you gotta put.

The severe restrictions imposed on the physiological functions and social life of boxers helps explain their anxiety to get through with the fight: ‘Git it over so you can go out. All the sacrifice, everythin’ you do man, *it’s tense!*’ Immediately after the bout, the libidinal dam patiently erected over weeks by the boxer and his entourage suddenly bursts: in orgiastic release, he goes out with friends, takes his wife out, and ‘catches up’ in bed. Some fighters ‘pig out’ for days¹² and quickly regain much of the weight they lost in preparation for the fight — and more. My sparring partner used to celebrate his victories by eating a gallon of coconut ice cream within two hours of the last bell while another of my gym mates went on eating binges of pizza and pop. Many fighters are known to ‘blow up’ between fights, putting on upwards of fifty pounds in the case of heavyweights, as their body is temporarily withdrawn from the pugilistic market and the ethos of sacrifice provisionally lifted.

Government of the body is a *collective enterprise requiring ‘team work’* (Goffman, 1969: 85–102) and involving the monitoring efforts not only of the trainer, manager, and ‘stable mates’ of the boxer but also those of his wife or girlfriend, kith, and close kin. Trainers routinely enrol the significant others of their fighters to assist them on the home front, so that to be a boxer truly is a ‘24-hour-a-day job.’ This means that sacrifice extends to the entourage of the fighter and places a particularly heavy burden on the trainer and on the fighter’s partner. The latter must be careful not to place emotional or sexual demands on the boxer, take complete responsibility for running the household, put up with his mood swings and offer ever larger doses of moral support as tension increases in anticipation of the bout — in short smoothly expedite the ‘stroking function’ assigned to women in the traditional sexual division of labor (Wacquant, 1992c).

As for trainers, they often become surrogate fathers to their understudies, devoting inordinate amounts of time and energy to resolving their love affairs, financial difficulties, and other private quandaries. In addition, it is their responsibility to deliver the fighter in tip-top shape and at the right weight on fight night; as the latter draws close, they live on the razor's edge.



Figure 3 Boxers relish being the object of the constant attention of their handlers: here a trainer and the author (middle) unwrap the hands of Illinois junior lightweight champion Curtis Strong before a major bout. The latter wears a vinyl 'sweat suit' to shed excess weight during training

The web of relations of information and cooperation between trainer, manager, gym mates, friends, and wife form a *quasi-panoptical apparatus* that ideally subjects the boxer to constant surveillance fit to permit the maximal accumulation of bodily capital for the bout. Again, one of the reasons why boxers are able to bear such wilful Spartanism is found in its affinity with their social condition of origin: for most fighters, self-denial has been woven into the fabric of daily life since childhood. Boxing gives a more systematic, codified, and (for some) profitable expression to an all-too-familiar experience of deprivation rooted in racial and class exclusion.

Together, these three rules of abstinence — fasting, celibacy, the denial of earthly distractions — converge to effect a particular 'civilizing' (Elias) of the body aimed at reserving somatic resources for the ring. In addition to the restrictions

of daily life, sacrifice includes the discipline and drudgery of training itself, the 'daily in and out rigmarole,' the 'daily grind of coming to the gym,' as a white heavyweight tersely put it (see Wacquant, 1992a). Getting up before dawn, six days of the week, to do one's 'roadwork' (three to seven miles of running, alternating straight jogging with shadow-boxing and sprints), and going to the gym every afternoon to repeat the exact same workout *ad infinitum* can take its toll — especially when it has to be juggled around family obligations and the constraints of a part-time or full-time job, as is the case of most pro boxers.¹³ 'It's *the hardest part is here, is in the gym*, goin' to the fight is the easiest part, all you gotta do is just take your exam and get an A on it' (black middleweight, 30, supported by manager). One understands better the eagerness of fighters to 'rumble' when one has an idea of the rigors they endure for weeks to prepare for the fight. 'You're in jail when you're trainin', it's like doin' time, you know.' The night they step into the squared circle is, at one level, a true liberation from self-imposed imprisonment.

Risk, *Illusio* and *Collusio*

Have you ever wondered at the miracle of a cauliflower ear or a nose warped in three directions? Do you know what a smashed Adam's apple feel like? How long does it take for a shattered cheekbone to heal? Do you know what it's like not being able to wait for that cheek to heal properly before getting in the ring again? How it feels to have a ruptured sinus cavity drain into that cheek? Think this is some kind of game?

No, answers Ralph Wiley (1989: 227, 228): 'Boxing is assault and battery with deadly weapons called the fists of man.' And this assault causes irreversible damage and leaves indelible marks upon the body. Fighters know this but, like all entrepreneurs worthy of the name, they are willing to take risks and put their capital — i.e., their body — on the line in the pursuit of occupational success. It is one of the founding antinomies, one of the irresolvable paradoxes of boxing that pugilists worship and cultivate their bodies in order to destruct that of their opponent and, in the process, too often, their own. For, as Mike Messner (1990: 211) points out, 'the body-as-weapon ultimately results in violence against one's own body.'

It is true, as testified by the booming growth of sports medicine, the pandemic use of drugs (painkillers, steroids, and amphetamins) among both professional and amateur athletes, and the rising statistics of serious injury, that all competitive sports result in a fair amount of injury (Gutman, 1987). Boxing is distinctive, however, in that it is the very goal of the game to inflict physical damage on one's opponent, to strike blows to his body and face in order to

'outgun' him and to render him temporarily unconscious, unable or unwilling to continue the contest. So that boxers, more so than any other athlete, face injury as a matter of course, a foregone conclusion of their activity. Pugilists are generally well aware of the perils that await them and of the physical consequences of fighting, including, potentially, death.¹⁴ And, no matter what their skills, they know that they are unlikely to have too many bouts without suffering some type of injury, if only because 'you have to use some parts of your body to protect some parts,' to borrow the words of one of my stable mates. But fighters come to conceive of physical corrosion as part of the pugilistic order of things, an acceptable price to pay and one that they believe they can significantly minimize through hard training, dutiful corporeal care, and prayer. Not only does the gym culture provide them with richly textured 'vocabularies of motives,' or 'acceptance frames' (Burke, 1984), that help them rationalize and deflect the consciousness and seriousness of the bodily deterioration they are likely to suffer (or the one they have already undergone). Much of this deterioration often does not become flagrant for years and the capacity to assess one's physical state realistically also declines *pari passu*, so that the more damage a boxer sustains, the less he is able and willing to perceive and acknowledge it.

That death is always a possibility is born out by the history of the game. Though rigorous statistical studies invariably show that pugilism is, in terms of casualties, a safer sport than most, including not only rugby, hockey, and horseback riding, but also college football, swimming, and mountaineering among others (American Medical Association, 1983), fatalities in the ring have received disproportionate attention for a variety of extrinsic reasons amounting to a moral impeachment of the sport¹⁵ and, as a result, are well documented. According to statistics compiled from *Ring Magazine*, there were 335 deaths of boxers (both professional and amateurs) between 1946 and 1979, with a high of 22 in 1953 and a low of 3 in 1973 (Moore, 1980). Fighters have, in rare instances, been known to openly display, or to play on, the haunting possibility of fatal injury. Before a recent middleweight world title fight, Iran 'The Blade' Barkley stunned even seasoned onlookers by yelling defiantly at the defending champion Darrin 'School Boy' Van Horn after the weigh-in ceremony: '*Let's go die now!*' Duk Koo Kim, who was taken out on a stretcher to decease from a massive brain hematoma at the conclusion of his brutal clash with Ray 'Boom Boom' Mancini in front of a national television audience on November 22, 1982, had written 'Kill or Be Killed' in Korean on a lampshade of his Las Vegas hotel room. Former lightweight contender Tyrone Jackson has likened the experience of walking towards the ring to that of 'going to the guillotine, the electric chair' (in Tindle, 1992: 41). But the prospect of death is generally studiously repressed, though some boxers admit to having had nightmares in which they see themselves or their opponents killed between the ropes (Anderson, 1991: 130; Wiley, 1989: 219). A 33-year-old gas meter reader who recently 'hung it up' after a strong campaign in the heavy-

weight division made this poignant confession when I asked him if the possibility of serious injury was on his mind when he stepped into the squared circle:

I, I even thought I would be killed in the ring sometimes, when I useta sit down, an' before goin' in the ring I would smell the gloves an' I useta think about death. I've always, sometimes always *haunted* me an' came back an' haunted me and said: (very softly, somber) 'You gonna die doin' this'. And nevertheless I kept doin' it, an' I'm still alive.

Nearly all boxers experience a range of minor and major physical ailments, either right after a bout (or a sparring session), or more or less permanently as a result of the cumulative attrition of their bodily capital. The hands and head are the two parts of the boxer's organism that are directly exposed to the most severe damage, including fractures of the carpus, metacarpus, and thumb, nose and jaws, acute osteo-articular stress, scratched or detached retina, and brain damage resulting in the syndrome called *dementia pugilistica* (also known as the 'punch-drunk' syndrome, whose symptoms include unsteady gait, slurred speech, foot dragging, and memory loss). Other common afflictions include black eyes and swollen faces, bruised ribs and kidneys (that can cause one to urinate blood), sore limbs and skin discoloration, twitching nerves in the face or teeth, chipped or broken teeth and crushed ears, not to mention cuts over or under the eye, on the eyelids, the forefront, and inside the mouth — Meldrick "TNT" Taylor is reported to have swallowed over three pints of his own blood during his 1989 'slugfest' with Mexican ringmaster Julio Cesar Chavez, a fight from which he never fully recovered.

The most common injury experienced by professional fighters is not the well-publicized (but still badly estimated) brain damage¹⁶ or visibly broken noses but deformation and chronic pain of the hands. Many well-known champions such as Muhammad Ali and Sugar Ray Leonard fought their whole careers through acute hand problems. Some fighters have too much punching power for the physical built of their hands — the kinetic energy packed by a boxer's punch can exceed 100 Joules — and break them repeatedly during fights. One fighter endowed with a 'Rolls Royce Body with Volkswagen Hands' is three-time world champion and Australian ringstorm Jeff Fenech who has undergone five hand operations and works out under the close supervision of a hand surgeon. In addition to his hands being too small for the rest of his body, their knuckles protrude abnormally so that he cannot make a true fist. He has to endure tremendous pain daily in training and at times avoid sparring altogether for up to two weeks. In the bout, he punches incorrectly to economize his hands, waiting for the right opening to deliver one of the few power punches he is afforded.¹⁷ During my 3-year sojourn at the Stoneland gym, two of the club's ten 'pros' saw

their careers cut short after their hands were ‘messed up’ and a third was being closely followed by a hand therapist.

Several factors converge to explain the apparent disjuncture between the boxers’ discursive awareness of the hazards of their trade and their practical disregard of them. First, the pragmatics of the fight itself strongly militate against them entertaining a sharp consciousness of the dangers of pugilism: ‘Never think what this man can do to you, always think what you can do to him,’ recommends one referee, lest you find yourself on the short end of the stick. While they might ponder the possibility of injury in training or just before the bout (most boxers say a brief prayer before the first bell sounds, for themselves and, quite frequently, for their opponent as well), once between the ropes, they must focus on ‘getting the job done’ and cannot afford to worry about possible damage in the urgency of the situation:

You don’t think about that, ‘cause all yer thinkin’, you’re too busy thinking how yer gonna knock the guy out and what yer gonna hit him with. (Mexican lightweight, 23, forklift driver)

You can’t think negative, you gotta think positively . . . that’s negative. ‘Cause then you’ll be afraid too much and if you’re afraid you won’t be aggressive enough. (white heavyweight, 28, prison warden)

It doesn’t bother you, you think about it for a minute but you jus’ you know jus’ pray to God that you do well, come out alright, an’ your opponent. (black heavyweight, 30, supported by ring earnings)

Second, and most importantly, the boxing universe constitutes a closed world, a self-contained web of social relations and cultural meanings that acts as a prism refracting outside information and judgements according to its own logic. More than his lack of information or the alleged peculiarities of the boxer’s psychic makeup, it is the *ordinary functioning of the pugilistic field*, as a relatively autonomous space of material and symbolic exchanges aimed at the (re)production of its specific form of capital, that provides the best explanation for the fighters’ seeming disregard for a ‘rational’ assessment of the risks they take. Much like crack addicts, who cannot but be aware of the human devastation wracked by the drug since it is all around for them to see first hand (Williams, 1992: 103, 142), boxers engage in routine practices and operate in mundane situations that constitute so many ‘framework of interpretations’ (Kenneth Burke) that tend to ‘screen out’ awareness of physical danger and impairment. Boxer, trainer, sparring partner, manager, matchmaker, everyone in the isolated circle of the gym has interest in the *collusio* supporting the collective illusion that serious

injury does happen, but . . . to others: those who do not train right, who do not sacrifice, who 'mess around' before fights, or who do not have 'the tools it takes' or do not 'dedicate themselves' to the game as they should.¹⁸

This collective bad faith (*male fides*) finds further reinforcement in the fact that most fighters live in inner-city neighborhoods where the objective probability of injurious death is inordinately high and violent crime a depressingly common occurrence (Wacquant, 1992b: esp. 42, 53–54, 56). The prevalence of public homicide in the ghetto and the fatalistic worldview it encourages gives massive plausibility to the notion, frequently voiced by trainers and boxers alike, that stepping into the ring is, everything considered, not much more dangerous than crossing the street or walking down to the corner store: 'You're takin' a chance doin' anything, Louie.' Members of the guild are also adept at citing publicized studies showing that the 'fistic science' is a less deadly sport than many others, including some that enjoy the favor of boxing's overwhelmingly white upper- and middle-class detractors, forgetting that statistics about fatalities do not take into account serious non-lethal injuries such as brain damage and vision impairment. Not to mention that physical courage and the ability to recover from severe injuries are officially glorified by the pugilistic field.

'You have to take care of your body so it will take care of you.' One of the ways in which boxers can and do protect their corporeal capital is by steadfastly applying the techniques of body-repair and care that are part of the pugilistic lore and that they learn from trainers and more experienced gym associates. A myriad rules of thumb and tricks of the trade, ranging from hand-wrapping methods to the rehearsal of specific defensive moves to analgesic creams, help them minimize disrepair of the body in the gym. Most boxers preface their workout by rubbing themselves with Albolene, a skin cleanser that opens up the pores and facilitates sudation; some soothe the irritation of their extremities with talc powder or massage their body with cocoa oil to prevent dryness and breaks of the epidermis. Others tape their hands with extra wrappings or insert a sponge or a wad of cotton or Kotex under their handwraps to cushion repeated shocks against the heavy bag. Proper wearing of the sparring equipment (cup and headguard) and greasing of the face with vaseline will help prevent cuts. Working relentlessly to improve one's defensive skills, to relax one's body in the ring (which can take years to master), to slip and parry blows and to 'ride punches' by moving one's upper body and head in synch with their flow is all good advice.

During the fight itself, care of the body is entrusted to one of the fighter's 'seconds' called the 'cutman.' As his title indicates, the task of the cutman is to control or to mitigate the immediate consequences of (potential) facial injuries during the minute-long intermission between two rounds. Armed with a battery of chemicals and coagulants, cotton swabs and a rounded metal instrument called an 'enswell,' he works uninterruptedly on the face of the fighter to control

cuts and bruises and to reduce swelling around the eyes (or a fracture should one occur) in an effort to avoid a stoppage of the bout on injury. The nemesis of a cutman is the type of fighter who cuts easily, known in the vernacular as a 'bleeder.' Here again, we see how the somatic endowment of the boxer significantly impacts not only his own actions but also those of the other participants in the pugilistic field.

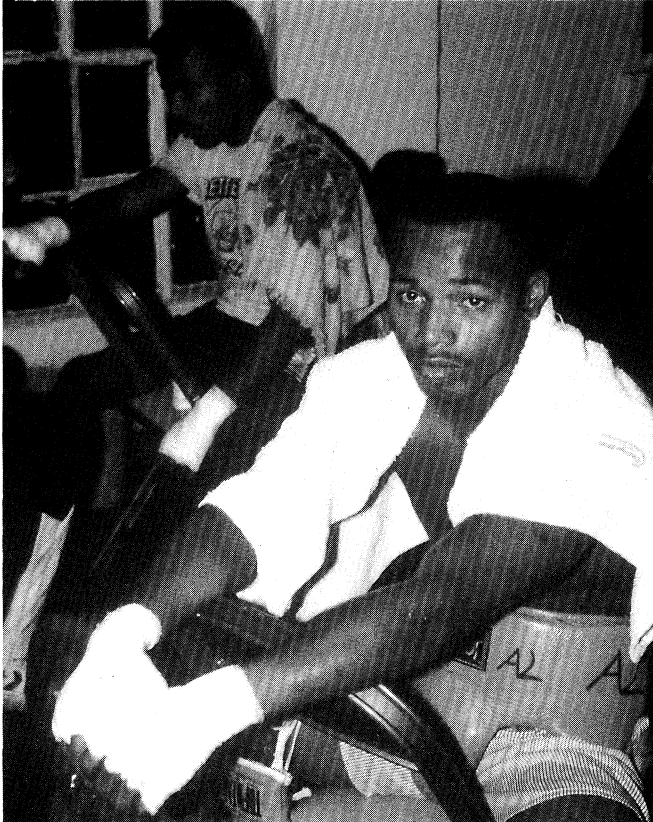


Figure 4 The agony of training gives way to the anguish of the fight in the tense wait just before climbing into the ring

Finally, the consuming routine of the workout itself helps allay or blunt the prospect of physical damage. In the manner of those Protestant businessmen who found in the performance of 'good works' the 'technical means, not of purchasing salvation, but of getting rid of the fear of damnation' (Weber, 1958: 117), boxers squash the dread of hurt and the accompanying anxiety of injury and defeat by training with redoubled dedication. 'I think about how I could be

seriously injured or knocked out an' I take that fear of bein' hurt or wounded and use it as a motivative factor and train *hard* to keep from comin' to that particular incident' (black supermiddleweight, 32, firefighter).¹⁹ Yet, ultimately, the strongest root of the boxer's belief in the pugilistic *illusio* is found lodged deep within his body. The analogy with the drug addict used above is apposite in another respect: engagement in the specific universe and acceptance of its stakes operate beneath the level of discourse and consciousness, through a non-thetic *quasi-organismic commitment* (akin in many respects to an addiction) that remains mysterious as long as one does not discern that the same fundamental schemata govern both the boxer's body–mind complex and the operation of the pugilistic field itself, structuring at once his corporeal and mental categories of perception, appreciation, and action, and the functioning of the material-cum-moral economy of boxing.

For, through prolonged immersion in the game, the fighter has embodied not only the technique (i.e., the panoply of 'traditionally efficacious acts,' to recall Marcel Mauss's definition) of pugilism but also its most important unstated presuppositions, its specific *doxa* (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 19–26, 127–130), including everything which makes the body the vehicle and instrument of what amounts to a sacrificial giving of oneself to the game. The willing embrace and submission — for it is both — of the boxer to the calling of the Manly art expresses neither a misperception of its dangers, nor a calculated utilitarian search for the monetary gains it promises (which, at any rate, turn out to be negligible in most cases), as rational choice theory would have it, nor yet normative compliance to some external cultural dictate, but the *unconscious fit between his (pugilistic) habitus and the very field which has produced it* and into which, therefore, it fits 'like a hand in a glove.' The boxer's *desire* to fight flows from a *practical belief* constituted in and by the immediate co-presence of, and mutual understanding between, his (re)socialized lived body and the game.²⁰

The boxer wilfully perseveres into this potentially self-destructive trade because, in a very real sense, he is inhabited by the game he inhabits. A veteran middleweight who has 'rumbled' on three continents for over a decade and who reported breaking his hands twice and his foot once, persistent problems with his knuckles (because of calcium deposits forming around them) as well as a punctured ear-drum and several facial cuts necessitating stitches, reveals this doxic acceptance, made body, of the stakes of pugilism when he fails to find cause for alarm in this string of injuries: 'Sure you do, you think about it, but then you regroup yourself, start thinkin', you can't, it's *in your blood so much*, you can't, you been doin' it so long, you can't, you can't give it up.' The pre-objective fit between habitus and field explains the ineffable quality of the commitment to a game that, in effect, *possesses* boxers to the extent that they possess (kinetic) knowledge of it and which becomes their master to the degree that they have acquired a mastery of it, and thence their inability to desist from it:

That's one thin' about a fighter, *he never retires*. He *quit*, but he never retires. I don't know what I could do that would give me that type of *thrill*. Man, fightin', man! it's har'! It's har' to describe it. On'y a fighter woul' know what I'm talkin' about.

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This paper is dedicated to my South Side brother Gary 'Ashante' Moore and his family, as a token of my gratitude for all they have taught me over the past four years about the ring, the ghetto, and life in this savage land called America, which I will never be able to repay. (July 1992).

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Notes

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1. The voluminous collection of essays *The Body: Social Processes and Cultural Theory* (Featherstone, Hepworth and Turner, 1991) is emblematic of the discursivist and theoreticist bias of the recent sociology of the body, which has constituted the latter into yet another object of abstract exegesis, thereby projecting onto it many of the (false) dualisms inherited from Cartesian ontology. There are of course exceptions to this, notably in the work of cultural historians and medical anthropologists, and in the fast growing (and very uneven) feminist or profeminist literature on the social construction of gender and sexual domination, but they are themselves dispersed and peripheral to the hegemonic logocentric approach.

2. What Bob Connell (1990: 83–84) says about masculinity would readily apply to the body more generally: 'A good deal of writing — unfortunately not so much actual research — has explored the processes through which masculinity is socially constructed. . . . There is a conspicuous shortage of research that explores these dynamics and arrives at some practical grip on the current dialectic concerning masculinity.'

3. The fifty boxers interviewed comprise almost the entire universe of professional fighters active in the Chicago—Gary metropolitan area at the time of the survey (summer 1991), thereby obviating problems of sampling. They include 36 blacks (two of them of West Indian descent), eight whites, five Puerto Ricans and one Mexican. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted an average of two hours, generating over 2,000 pages of transcripts. I have occasionally changed minor identifying characteristics such as age and weight class in order to guarantee the anonymity of the respondents. For more details on the setting and methods of this research, see Wacquant (1989: 33–42 and 1992a).

Words or phrases in quotes are either drawn from interviews and conversations with boxers and trainers, or expressions that are part of the 'stock of knowledge' shared by members of the pugilistic universe. Unless otherwise indicated, the emphases in the quotes are those of the locutor.

4. For a discussion of the generalized concept of capital and its various species, see also Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992: 115–120)

5. I will leave aside the complication introduced by the fact that most professional boxers are legally bound to managers who contractually enjoy exclusive rights over their ring performances. Briefly put, we may say that boxers *possess* their bodily capital while their managers *own* the right to convert it into (potential) pugilistic value. What matters for purposes of the present analysis is that it is boxers who exercise rulership over their bodies in the phenomenological sense. Also, for lack of space, this paper does not explicitly discuss the question of the relation between boxing and the production and ritual affirmation of manhood. Suffice it to say that the bodily labor of fighters is fundamentally a work of *engenderment* in the sense that it creates a new being but also a gendered being embodying and exemplifying a definite form of masculinity: plebeian, heterosexual, and heroic.

6. Some promoters specialize in the provision of 'used bodily capital,' i.e., washed-up boxers or 'opponents' who can provide valiant but riskless opposition to up-and-coming fighters who need to 'build up' their record. They are known in the business as 'flesh wholesalers' (see Brunt, 1987: 200seq. and Shapiro 1988 for a description of the traffic in 'opponents').

7. Body alteration can take a more extreme form in the case of these fighters who, in 'the old days,' had the nerve endings of their nose burnt or had their nose cartilage surgically removed to prevent potentially life-threatening fractures (as when bone chips are smashed into the brain), only to have it put back in place at the end of their career).

8. Master trainer Georgie Benton, whose current students include undisputed heavyweight titlist Evander Holyfield and lightweight champion Pernell Whitaker, instructs his fighters to punch at the forward shoulder of their opponent so as to bruise the deltoid muscle and to diminish the strength of the latter's jab, eventually forcing him to lower his hand so that it then becomes possible to counterpunch over his extended arm.

9. I could pile up pages and pages of quotes from boxers, trainers, and managers on the ethos of sacrifice. Goody Petronelli, the manager–trainer of former middleweight king 'Marvellous' Marvin Hagler, puts it as well as anyone else: 'To be a fighter, you have to give up so much. Up in the morning to do your roadwork. No drugs. No drinking. No going out late at night. You're in the rack early because you got to get at least eight hours' sleep. If you don't get that body in shape, you're going to get your head knocked off. Are you willing to do all this stuff and dedicate yourself to being a fighter?' (in Anderson, 1991: 39).

10. Needless to say, excessive fasting and weight loss close to the bout saps the strength of any boxer and one too often sees fighters walk between the ropes already exhausted from making the weight. A boxer with an emaciated look who shows no sweat two rounds into the fight is one who has no water left to shed from 'drying out' and is courting very serious physical damage.

11. Weber (1966: 238) saw this well: 'Ascetic alertness, self-control, and methodical planning of life are seriously threatened by the peculiar irrationality of the sexual act, which is ultimately and uniquely unsusceptible to rational organization.'

12. Klein (1986: 124) reports similar practices of 'institutional gorging' among professional bodybuilders in Southern California.

13. Only 18 % of Chicagoland fighters are financially supported by a manager (or by their sole ring earnings). Fifty percent are employed full-time and 12 % hold part-time jobs; the rest gain income by 'working the street.'

14. 'There is not a fighter I know who does not understand that he is in a life-risking profession' (Toperoff, 1987: 194). A 33-year old black middleweight who recently gave up two jobs as security guard and pizza delivery person in order to pursue a rather undistinguished boxing career full time

seconds this opinion: 'It only take one punch an' you can be messed up for life or you could *die* in there. An' you look in the papers, jus' two guys overseas that had, both underwent brain surgery... [When] you see somebody die in the ring an' there's been guys dyin' that it's *real scary*. But I said, I jus' say 'Lord thank God that *it was not me!* It coulda been me, I count my blessin's everyday.'

15. Among the reasons that have converged to make boxing a pariah sport are its long-standing association with the criminal underworld (Sammons, 1988: chap. 6), the fact that it has become the virtual monopoly of minorities and the lower classes, and its dramatized valorization of personal bodily aggression that violates the bourgeois sense of the sacredness of the individual self and of his or her corporeal envelope.

16. In particular, we still know little on the precise etiology of brain damage among fighters (the exact mechanism of the 'knock-out' is not elucidated) and on the various factors that make it vary. Recent clinical research suggests that ring style has a strong impact on its incidence: a detailed study of 52 French boxers which separated them into two groups, 40 'scientific boxers' (or stylists) and 12 'punchers' (or brawlers) turned up no neurological damage among the former but a rate of 50% among the latter (Pérez, 1989: 57–76, esp. 64–65). It thus appears that different types of bodily capital determine significantly discrepant probabilities of injury and erosion patterns through the mediation of style.

17. 'KO Interview: "Jeff Fenech: 'I've Got a Rolls Royce Body with VW Hands,'" *KO Magazine*, May 1991, pp. 42, 53. Stoically putting up with pain is one of the core dictactes of the occupational ideology of 'sacrifice.'

18. Fighters who simultaneously express full knowledge of the dangers of professional boxing and suppress their seriousness (the same who denounces the 'barbarickness behind the sport' and complains that all of its rules are skewed towards forcing the fighter to '*injure, hurt, maim, destroy* another person' and who calls for the unionization of boxers, the wearing of headguards, and increased medical supervision says later in his interview that 'there hasn't been a lotta deaths, there hasn't been a lot of brain damage, I don't *believe*, not a whole lot,' and that he, at any rate, has a 'God-given ability' to avoid hard punches) are reminiscent of those 'crackheads' who deplore addiction but cling to a fictitious and self-serving distinction between 'addicts' (others) and connoisseurs (themselves), even though they bear all the visible stigmata of acute chemical dependency (Williams, 1992: 78 and *passim*). A germane denial strategy is to pass injuries off as accidents and irregularities rather than the normal, predictable outcome of the pugilistic contest. A black light-heavyweight who suffered consecutive fractures of the cheekbone, jaw, and nose, insists: 'But every injury that I've had, it was from one punch, yeah, one punch. (defensively) *It wasn't from no barrage of punches, a series of punches*. Everytime I got my jaw broke, it was from a devastatin' punch' (emphasis added).

19. A black cruiserweight from the same gym agrees 'What reinforces the thought of that you might possibly get hurt is from the guys that you hurt, okay? That puts things into my min'. Punches that I work towards building and being able to throw and throwing them and *crip'ling my opposition* and saying to myself, "thank God that's not me," OK, 'cause, (lowering his voice) hey it could be, it could have been. And that keeps you from being really cocky and you have to be *bumble* because you don't know what's in the plan, what's in the making — that's why you 'preciate all benefits and the possibility of being able to work an' apply yourself and build upon your skills and you pray before the fight.' Suffering a brutal KO (in which one is 'knocked out cold as a milk shake') can be a frightful and demoralizing experience which may cause a boxer either to retire — if temporarily — or to rededicate himself to training in an effort to compensate for his lost sense of invulnerability.

20. 'Practical belief is not a "state of mind", still less a kind of arbitrary adherence to a set of instituted dogmas and doctrines ("beliefs"), but rather a state of the body' (Bourdieu, 1990: 68).

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