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## **The Contextual Side of Professional Boxing: One Consultant's Experience**

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### **Introduction**

The opportunity to consult with people is, I believe, a worthwhile experience for every aspiring sport psychologist or mental training consultant. There is no better way to start learning than from the shared experiences of those who came before you. My colleagues within this edition of *Athletic Insight* (see Botterill, 2004; Ferraro, 2004; Halliwell, 2004) have graciously and eloquently provided some insight into team sport contexts and individual sports. They are eminent practitioners within their respective sports, and so, their voices are best informed to share stories, tactics and philosophies that have worked well within their respective contexts. For this edition, I have been provided the opportunity to wear two hats; that of installment editor, and that of mental training consultant within the sport of professional boxing. It is with the latter intention that the immediate article is written.

Professional boxing is a dramatic sport, where two athletes, hopefully of equal training and abilities attempt to match skills in the confines of a roped ring. The abilities I speak of are in part a question of physical preparation. Taken into account are the attributes of coordination, stance, balance, and stamina, to provide a few examples. Mental strengths are also essential, and in fact, most every elite boxing coach I know has indicated that they are telling of ring performance. In success, the mentally and emotionally well prepared boxer dictates the pace of the bout, controls the center of the ring, and yes, he also controls the opponent's tactics. The control by one athlete in boxing often comes at the expense of the other. In terms of sport psychology practice, the exerting of control often originates from the selected mental strengths that Peterson and Seligman (2000) refer to within their taxonomy as optimistic thought, persistence, courage, and confidence.

When setbacks are experienced in professional boxing they most often come at a cost. On one level, the boxer's performance record plays a large role in his ability to progress toward a world ranking, and often times accompanying it, larger purses that aspiring sport psychology professors / practitioners only imagine! A second consideration is the physical experience of post-performance aches, bruises, and in a few instances, the more serious setbacks that require longer spans of recovery. A third level of expense, one I endorse as equally important in boxing is the psychological and emotional realm. The emotional and psychological struggles experienced by many boxers post adversity can be the most telling of their future performance. Within the sport of professional boxing, there is a possible home for sport psychology consultation. When the consultant is included as part of the performance formula, there is opportunity for considerable benefit to both athlete and coaching staff.

It is my intention through this short article to share a few professional boxing experiences. I have consulted with professional boxers and their entourages for several years, and I have been part of a performance team that has tasted global World Boxing Council and World Boxing Association success several times. I have also been part of sad times where mistakes were made by staff and athlete, always collaboratively. Within this article, I will restrict myself to positive experiences, and so, I will confine myself to the motivational aspects of professional boxing performance that have worked.

### **Setting the Stage**

The invite to consult with professional boxing did not come to me in one stage. Instead, a full-time offer was extended, and when I could not act on it immediately due to doctoral obligations, it was rescinded. Professional boxing is a business, and like all other professional sport groups, boxing management groups require ongoing service, a serious commitment, and often, full immersion by all team members.

Upon completion of my doctorate, I was able to provide the high level of commitment required from service providers for global professional boxing success. I contacted the head coach several times over a six week span, and my approaches were met with slight skepticism. It had been two years since I was initially approached, and the group already had sampled mental training consulting. Each consultant has a unique approach, and I insisted that mine was founded on collegiality and group rapport before all else. And so, I persisted and met with the coach several times, began chatting with the athletes, and followed up diligently with management through phone calls.

When the offer finally came to meet with athletes, I met first with the head coach, and reviewed with him, the performance records and observed strengths and weaknesses from a coach's perspective. It was, and continues to be essential in my view that coaches provide as much information regarding their athletes, and where those athletes are meant to progress to. My role as consultant was to serve as an extension of day to day coaching, with mental skills geared toward overall athlete development. It was clear to me that my skills were supplemental. Further, I felt it essential to identify and acknowledge the expansive hours committed by coaching staff in all aspects of athlete development.

With the coach's endorsement of me as consultant, initial meetings were scheduled with every athlete. Before doing so, however, I began attending daily athlete training, and I was provided access to the pre-bout dressing room leading up to one important professional boxing gala. I did not intervene initially. Instead, I observed each athlete's preparation from an inconspicuous corner of the room, and I began to consider the possible aspects within each athlete's performance that seemed to influence confidence and outcomes just prior to performance. A few factors that drew my attention were arrival time at the venue, the quantity of staff within the dressing room prior to each boxer's bout, quantities of noise, physical space allotment, and warm-up strategies. I should say that the aforementioned factors were mostly logistical, and their consideration was employed as a starting point for my understanding, only.

### **Initial Meeting – Initial Barriers**

There was a wide variety of athlete responses when the head coach scheduled regular mental training consultation as part of each athlete's training program, just as earlier consultants including Ravizza (1988) warned. Several of the athletes within the management group were already successful amateur boxers, each with Olympic medals, World Championship medals, or both. Others already had considerable professional sport experience and ratings among the top ten boxers worldwide within their respective weight divisions. All of the athletes had a reasonable understanding of what worked best for them, and most questioned, if not wondered, whether refinements were truly necessary.

In the domain of professional sport athletes usually have a very strong understanding of what works best for them. My approach was to meet each athlete informally, and to gain an understanding of their past experiences. During the initial discussion with each one, amateur and previous professional sport experiences were discussed. The athletes willingly shared their experiences, and my job was to listen and to clarify for the sake of my own understanding. With more clarity of each athlete's successes and setbacks came a better sense of what worked, and within some conversations, what did not. Both aspects eventually became essential parts of planning, and both parts sometimes added to the coaching staff's understanding of each respective athlete.

During the latter part of each athlete's discussion, I waited for an opportunity, and asked what sorts of support an ideal mental training consultant might provide. Surprisingly, every athlete had some suggestions in this regard. Some suggested that they wanted a more formalized competition plan. Others wanted to work on re-attribution training and resilience. Still others wanted to discuss topics relating to personal life balance. I realized that the head coach was right; there would be a multifaceted place for mental training support. I did not, however, realize the mutual learning possibilities that would unfold with time.

## **Achieving Solid Relational Footing**

There is no substitute for time. Relationships cannot be rushed in the world of mental training provision, especially not in boxing. The professional athletes I have worked with are experts in their domain in the way that Salmela (1994) spoke of in terms of elite coaches. They have allocated considerable time and effort over more than a ten year span to elite boxing, and they often know instinctively how to apply their skills in perfect and less than perfect settings. The suggestions I provided were to become refinements, and nothing more. With an approach that was typically non-directive, I employed the suggestions provided to me by the athletes and their coaching staff as a starting point. Boxing is a sport riddled with adversity, and adversity tends to build rapport in elite sport settings (see Schinke, Draper & Salmela, 1997). Boxers are often faced with adversity, even when they are performing well. There are questions of weight management, travel, media demands, unfamiliar training venues and the like. With the typical demands placed on professional boxers, there is a strong need for friendship and collegiality. Every athlete needs forum within his support system to voice concerns, and to share fears, successes, and future plans. Though I always believed in being approachable, the extent that I was approachable after being introduced to professional sport increased dramatically.

You might wonder how a consultant can tell when she or he is getting onto solid relational footing with athletes. In boxing, that question was addressed through the term “coffee time”. I love good coffee, and interestingly, so do all of the boxers I work with. Every morning’s consulting began early for all of us. I, for instance, had to wake up before 05:00 AM to travel and attend early morning training. Mental training meetings followed in a scheduled pattern, allowing each athlete up to two hours to discuss training developments, and in some instances, momentary challenges. Meetings earlier on in the consulting process began with me offering to buy each athlete a coffee. Before long, however, the athletes arrived at their scheduled meetings with two cups of coffee in hand. One athlete even chose to prepare coffees for both of us at home before departing for the training venue. It was not the coffee per se that was important. It was the unstated message that the athletes were both generous and thoughtful. So began friendships that continue to withstand the test of time. Rapport was built over a simple yet meaningful cup of coffee.

## **Preparing Athletes for Crucial Bouts**

Each athlete I work with has a unique way of preparing for performance. Performance preparation is a day in and day out process in boxing, much like it is in most every other professional sport. What distinguishes boxing from most other sporting domains is the frequency of athlete performance. In boxing, professional athletes tend to have their fights staggered according to an overall plan, especially when they are well managed. Professional bouts cannot be fought on a weekly basis. Thus, technical and open sparring are used to ensure that each athlete remains ring sharp in between bouts, where spans of time typically vary from six weeks to upwards of one year for experienced successful professionals. Sparring partners are selected tactically by the coaching staff to duplicate

the skills and style of upcoming opponents. Thus, part of the athlete's self-confidence in terms of preparedness is built in the training ring.

Concurrent mental preparation must also reconcile the bigger picture of readiness and progression outside of the ring. To do so, I confirm with each athlete personal planning needs and personal preferences for the week leading up to each bout, for the weigh-in the day before the bout, for the morning and day of the bout, and in terms of dressing room equipment and human resource needs. The logistical preferences of each athlete refines with time, though throughout, athlete perceived control is essential whenever possible. It seems that success within professional boxing is often found within small details, and I am of the belief that by attending to small details, the management team tends to reduce athletes' concerns.

The athlete's sense of preparedness is also in part a visual affair. The athlete must be presented and portrayed as strong, well trained, and confident. Athlete conferences, sometimes with the opponent, sometimes without, are electrically charged - staged events, with strength presented through numbers. The term entourage is often depicted in movies such as Rocky with hangers on. My experience is that a convincing number of highly creditable support-staff, which in our case has includes a nutritionist, a strength and conditioning coach, a mental training coach, an assistant technical coach, the head coach, and more general management, provides a synergistic feeling of competence from the inside of our group looking out and from the perspective of strangers looking in. Both perspectives tend to build, maintain and restore confidence for the professional boxer before a crucial bout.

During the final few days leading up to the bout, I am also easily accessible for individual consultation. Much like my colleagues within this edition, I am on call and at the ready, always. Visits with each athlete have become a formal part of final preparation. For some athletes, the visits are a formality, most of the time. However, with each athlete there have been instances where motivational or perspective discussions were sought. Some athletes did so in the privacy of their hotel rooms. I dialogued with others during moments they deemed as crucial, such as immediately after weigh-ins where the process was regarded as distracting or undermining. I have also left meals untouched on restaurant tables to support athlete needs and discuss momentary concerns. My availability during those moments solidified earlier relationships, and in many instances served a restorative purpose for the athlete. The intention with moment by moment availability is not to be needed. Instead, momentary availability is provided to assist with the unforeseeable, when such moments happen. Throughout, my role as mental training consultant has included the necessary skill set of reframing, where negative concerns are re-evaluated as potential strengths.

The final pre-performance consideration is something I like to term "on-site management". Dressing room management is a protocol that I have helped each athlete refine in collaboration with the head coach. Different athletes clearly have different personalities and different levels of arousal and anxiety. Some prefer a busy dressing room with loud music, and a large and audibly supportive staff. The extended and highly

charged ambiance created by a heavily frequented dressing room for some instills a positive mood and the necessary encouragement for an appropriate elevated level of arousal. Others prefer more physical space and a quieter and more heavily monitored pre-bout warm-up environment. During the hours before performance, I become dressing room motivational attendant. For coaches and athletes, I have come to learn what a facial expression or a look my way infers. Often, slight signals by the athlete and coach suggest a need for crucial momentary change within the locker room. My key functions within final pre-bout moments, then, is to monitor the room, and when needed, to respond decisively as a counter measure.

## **The Media and Performance**

Media are a necessary tool in professional boxing. Every promotional boxing group's intention is to fill the stands, and to sell television rights. After all, boxing is part sport and part entertainment. Every member of boxing staff from athletes to coaching staff to mental training consultant is reminded ongoing that we are in the entertainment business. With that understanding, for me came a lesson that I have rarely found in sport psychology articles. Every member of the consulting team is meant to emphasize the boxer's strengths. I find that the media can bolster athlete confidence through appropriately selected questions, and through positive bolstering stories about the athlete, with both aspects synergistically contributing to each other. Boxers are sensitive to media feedback, and thus, there is an inherent need for all staff members to be on the most positive terms with media imaginable. Good relationships seem to serve as a foundation for facilitative stories and reinforced confidence.

The media demands are an important aspect of every aspiring boxer's life. Readers might assume that the mental demands of media relations include pre- and post-bout press conferences. Both of these aspects are naturally important to the athlete in terms of marketing, and in terms of how successes and failures are explained. In addition, media demands for the more established athletes I have worked with include day to day demands and demands in the dressing room just before and just after the bout. Boxers are gracious people, and they understand that their final preparation cannot be kept sacred from the more prestigious television companies that make large bout purses possible. Therefore, final mental preparation, centering and composure are completed within close range of camera people, commentators, and high powered lighting. These demands are prepared for in advance of high level accomplishments, often times with more experienced professional boxers passing their experiences and strategies to those who are less experienced.

## **The Chronology of Achievement and Maintenance**

Boxers have a distinct lifecycle as athletes. I have come to learn that it is easiest to work with the aspiring professional boxer. Developing boxers have desire, and that desire is fueled by the promise of success, notoriety, and financial stability. Boxers often come from financially challenged homes, and their desire to succeed includes a level of desperation that provides fertile ground for learning. Before each bout, the ambitious

boxer will follow extensive training regimes, both physical and mental. There are also strict nutritional challenges that the aspiring boxer is willing to live with. The refinements of all tactics are charted with the end of one bout signaling the started preparation of the next one. My job as part of the coaching staff is to ensure that each athlete understands and regards himself as the central part of his own professional refinement. When I do my job well, the boxer understands his constant steps toward the ultimate destination of athletic eminence, and world championship status.

Eventually, the most ambitious of boxers reaches the pinnacle of his sport. He finally receives his opportunity to prove that he is completely prepared in front of a large stadium of fans, with accompanying pay per vu television coverage as he fights for a world title. Those moments are amazing for the athlete and his support-staff. For the athlete, the weeks leading up to the bout, at least mentally, serve as a pause for reflection. Our discussions are in part an exploration of past challenges, and how each one has shaped the athlete into the contender he has now become. The consideration of past experiences provides reminders of what was learned, and it also provides satisfaction and perspective. All three aspects are necessary when the intention is composure and clarity during the bout.

The maintenance of athlete success is more challenging. Though boxers always wish to retain world titles, the sacrifices that materialize into success and earlier world title defenses often become unrealistic with time. Boxers experience the very same life changing events that all other people experience the world over. They find solace in family life, they become interested by new professional possibilities, and they enjoy their privacy. These three aspects often surface after the boxer has reached his athletic goal of becoming the best, and over the long-term they seem to compromise sport performance motivation. The challenge from a mental training consultant's point of view is to support life development while also supporting an ongoing pursuit of athletic excellence. So long as the athlete is enticed by the process of athletic refinement, the promise of improvement and title retention exist. When priorities gradually shift to other life interests, focus and persistence shift along with them. The support-staff's ambitions must then keep step with the life evolution of each athlete.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

I truly enjoy the consulting aspect of sport psychology. It is rewarding when things work as they should, and it is always an education regardless of outcome. When people ask me what good consulting in the sport of professional boxing entails, I argue for an approach that includes the forest and the trees. What I mean is that the athlete's psychological and emotional well-being hinges as much on life events while training and during day to day existence as it does on any solid mental training skill set.

The big picture part of performance is built through a consideration of the athlete's life experiences. When an athlete is happy with his home environment, his friends, his professional agreements, and his training, his satisfaction reveals itself through a consistently high level of athletic persistence. Conversely, personal unhappiness can

trickle into day to day training regardless of the athlete's ability to center. It seems that pressure is the acid test of overall satisfaction, with dissatisfaction surfacing at inopportune moments. Therefore, I have always taken the approach that as often as possible, small life questions must be addressed decisively. And so, part of my consulting role is to assist athletes with the resolution of potential life barriers before they become barriers to athletic and general life performance.

The second general aspect of my consulting experience has included assisting athletes with their mental training and planning refinements. As a graduate student, I did not realize the importance of good mental training in relation to bottom line performance despite the advanced warnings of my professor, Dr. Terry Orlick. Be assured that a solid base of mental training skills do facilitate good mastery and coping responses in challenging environments. Orlick's (2000) most recent edition of *In Pursuit of Excellence* provides a large number of helpful suggestions in that regard. In addition, I suggest that Seligman's (1990) suggestions regarding how to build and restore resilience can be helpful in the bolstering of athlete persistence. Finally, an understanding of how to build and restore athlete efficacy (Bandura, 1997) can inform good practice throughout the athlete's progression to success.

In conclusion, I am certain that all of my colleagues would agree that the role of sport psychology consultant includes roles that a casual observer would regard as grunt work. I have carried athletes' bags, searched for food and water, bought coffees, and monitored dressing rooms, to provide a few examples. These tasks were not a formal part of my role, but opportune moments often result from informal helping behaviors. The mental training consultant / sport psychologist is part of a team, and when we immerse ourselves in the experience of consulting strong rapport is built with all members of the organization. After all, consulting is about helping, and who ought to be more willing to help than the person who has chosen a helping role as a professional career.

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