

World title boxing: from early beginnings to the first bell

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Abstract

There is scant literature where applied sport scientists have considered first hand experiences preparing professional boxers for world title bouts. The present submission reflects more than 10 years of applied experience working with professional boxers, residing in Canada. What follows is a composite of sequential steps that ownership and coaching staff of one Canadian management group have tried leading up to more than 20 world title bout experiences. The strategies proposed have been built progressively over time, and what follows is a general overview of a more detailed pre-bout structure from shortly in advance of a world title bout offer to the moment when the athlete enters the ring to perform. We propose that an effective structure is founded upon detailed a priori preparation, tactical decisions throughout bout preparation, and a thorough understanding by the athlete of what he will encounter during the title bout.

Key words: Boxing, competition, performance, psychology.

Introduction

There is scant literature where the connection of sport psychology and boxing intertwine, practically (Schinke, 2004). And yet, many are the adages from boxers, where the focus is clearly psychological. Mike Tyson proposed "that everybody has a plan until they are hit". What Tyson meant (we believe) is that no one had a plan for him (i.e., his bad intentions). Similarly, the legendary boxing coach Cus D'Amato (Mike Tyson's coach early on) believed that "fights are won and lost in the head". We are inclined to agree with the aforementioned athlete and coach. We have found that outcomes are heavily bound to athlete management and athlete psychology, both in content and the philosophy that content is couched in. Boxing is a sport where wins and losses are twofold: they are garnered physiologically and also psychologically (Schinke, 2007). Though physiological and psychological considerations intersect, the focus in this submission is primarily on the psychological and managerial aspects of athlete preparation. Herein, it is proposed that the outcome of a bout, which reflects in a large part how the athlete is prepared, can shorten and lengthen a professional boxer's career. So much so that if the athlete wins or loses, and there is an understanding of why the outcome unfolded as it did, hope can be built, leading to increased effort directed effectively toward performance enhancement and excellence (see Rettew & Reivich, 1995; Seligman, 1991). Conversely, if the athlete is prepared with an unstructured or loosely structured organization, and without a deep understanding of what to expect, or if effective planning is abandoned, the consequence is (eventually, if

not sooner) diminished output, leading to sub-par performance (see Botterill, 2005).

In keeping with the present overarching instalment of combative sport, our contribution (a submission authored by a sport psychology consultant and world championship boxing coach) is intended as a catalytic work, framed for researchers and practitioners (see Martens, 1987), built upon the authors' lived experiences. Emphasized is the contextual world of professional boxing, though only at a particularly high and visible level. Within this submission, the authors (a sport psychology consultant and a boxing coach) relay based upon our experiences in the field how we would prefer to prepare athletes for world title bouts. The description is a composite of bits and pieces of what our team has integrated, garnered through previous title bouts and a variety of athletes. Following is our view of how mental readiness and performance can (and should) happen for a critical match, where the intent is to deliver the athlete to the first bell fully prepared, confident, and thus able to perform at his potential. The structure of the paper is sequential in that it begins before the proposition of the bout, and then progresses onward through final preparation, the walk to the ring, the touching of gloves, and the first bell. Finally, it should be recognized that the views expressed herein are the authors, and that others might have equally effective approaches to world title bout preparation. Further, it should be noted that the aspects addressed are only a glimpse of a larger plan, where realistically, there are more details than can be deconstructed into one short manuscript.

The athlete before the offer

There is surely a wide variety of ways that athletes, in collaboration with their management team, accept and decline bouts. However, the organization surrounding each athlete often includes the coach, strength and condition coach, general manager, owners, and the sport psychology consultant. Combined, the team works extensively with each athlete as he moves through the rankings, always seeking out bouts that reinforce the development of the athlete, meaning his technical development and also his confidence. The development of either aspect without the other is necessary, though insufficient if the goal is to prepare the athlete for a competently executed world title bout. Every bout leading to the ultimate bout is another step toward the ultimate encounter that will ensue (i.e., the title bout). When the world title bout offer finally arrives, it is hoped that the athlete has gained a considerable knowledge of what is required in his lead up (typically 10-12 weeks) to the performance. Knowledge is

more than a matter of guess work, and it is steeped in previous pre-bout preparations, bouts experiences, and post-bout debriefings. Even once the athlete is ranked in the top 15 of his division in the WBC, WBA, IBF, WBO, or with Ring, there are always lessons identified from each bout. From post-bout debriefings athletes are intended to gain the impression that their learning is dynamic, and that they are progressing regardless of how high they are ranked globally. Even when the athlete becomes a world titlist, and especially when titles are defended, there is the need for the management group to push the athlete forward, and for the athlete to engage in ongoing development regardless of stature, performance record, and financial status.

The world title opportunity

Though the reader might anticipate that every world title bout opportunity is the same, meaning that all are accepted quickly, signed, and prepared for, there are a number of considerations that happen at the point of being offered the opportunity. From the moment a client is ranked among the top 15 athletes in his division, there is the possibility that a call can happen at any time, offering the athlete an opportunity to compete against the existing world champion. When the athlete has just progressed to the top 15 in the rankings, it varies with each athlete whether an offer should be accepted. When an athlete prematurely accepts a bout opportunity, and then subsequently loses the bout in a manner where the loss diminishes confidence in his abilities, it is challenging to restore such an athlete to his pre-bout confidence. Consequently, management groups are meant to work closely with the athlete, and they are there to help guide (and in some cases protect) the athlete from challenges that are proposed prematurely or too late in the athlete's career. There are also cases we have encountered where less experienced athletes, meaning relative newcomers to the world rankings, are able to progress more quickly up the ranks, leading to an earlier acceptance of a world title bout (one where our client is not the mandatory challenger in the division). The critical point for a young athlete is to ensure that knowledge and confidence are built to the point where the athlete is prepared for the challenge of a world title bout. Before that point, it is simply too early to accept even the most enticing of offers. Finally, there are also athletes who require ever-challenging bouts so that each bout is designed to retain the athlete's attention on career progression. Not all athletes are built up for the critical bout with the same brevity, nor methodology. Underpinning effective decisions is the implicit understanding that success requires thoughtful preparation, and also timing.

Accepting the world title bout

When a world title bout is accepted, which varies from a matter of a few hours to several days following the offer, the management team is brought together to structure the preparation plan. The first question considered is who exactly will work with the athlete. For example, not every athlete employs the same coach, and not all athletes seek out the same strength and conditioning coach. Next we consider the question of where the athlete should train

when striking his training camp. Some athletes have remained in their home city of Montreal, Canada because they are relatively disciplined, and also because they have family commitments (i.e. several are married and with children). For those athletes who remain in their home city, the goal is to ensure that the preparation structure is extensive, and that the typical daily distractions are managed while the athlete and coach narrow their focus progressively on the opponent, in relation to the bout. Others we work with are single, or they tend to be distracted while in their home city, or both concerns at once. For such athletes, we have always considered where the training camp should be in relation to the athlete. For some athletes requiring a relocated training camp, simply by relocating we have solved the potential distractions that happen as a result of media and entourage demands. For others, we consider relocating to a secluded spot away from any urban setting so as to focus entirely on the bout (in one such case it was the mountains of Columbia, in another it was the countryside of New York state, USA, in a third it was an urban setting in another country). The general goal through a designated location is to develop the necessary structure and ambiance required for the athlete and coach to prepare for the bout. All told, the location is a critical part of each athlete's preparation, and clearly not all athletes follow the same formula. The goal in effective training camp location is to account for and partial out the identified physical distractions, while also ensuring that the athlete enjoys the training camp experience. Conversely, if the athlete becomes disenfranchised with the training camp location part way through the process, the flux associated with unhappiness and potential change can erode confidence via the disruption of what was initially a coherent structure.

Studying the opponent

Many coaches and athletes watch video footage of their opponents in advance of a critical bout. The extent to which our athletes study their opponents has become progressively more detailed. Initially, the focus was on the boxing style of the opponent, meaning (1) whether he is a south paw or orthodox boxer, (2) whether he is a puncher or counter puncher, (3) what the opponent's typical punches are and how often they are thrown, and (4) what he does at specific points in time during each round of a bout. You cannot gain the patterns we look for by simply viewing one bout repeatedly on a website. Like all athletes, our athletes evolve with time, so patterns are sought across bouts with particular attention to the most recent bouts. Beyond the generic points we have considered above, we try to learn about the athlete we are facing. The goal through such education is to learn as much about the opponent as we possibly can. For example, we follow (very closely) the opponent's press conferences. From press conferences one might learn the types (and also the extent of) pressures the opponent is placing upon himself through declarations and predictions. Additionally, we consider how the athlete typically enters the arena, including his choice of music, level of confidence, how he enters the ring, and what he does before and during the point where he touches gloves with previous opponents. A few months ago, we worked with an athlete

who fought for the WBC Super Middleweight Title. His opponent (in previous bouts) entered the ring and bumped into the opponents, thus distracting the intended athletes, all the while asserting his domination of the ring before the first bell. In preparation our athlete was aware of the opponent's pattern, thus enhancing his confidence through an appreciation of what was to come. We also tend to study how the opponent functions in the corner from one round to the next. If the athlete does not listen carefully to information in early rounds, that becomes an opportunity to frustrate the athlete early on, assuming that he will be non-communicative with his corner if things go wrong early on. If on the other hand, the athlete becomes less attentive in the latter rounds, therein rests another opportunity. Through a careful analysis of the opponent, the athlete and the coach gain an understanding of what to expect from the opposition - the best prediction of an opponent's behaviour is his past behaviour.

The final week

The final week prior to the bout is critical from a tactical vantage, and in fact all that remains within the final week is a careful management of the athlete. My teammates and I have found that bouts are won and lost in the final week. Professional boxing is sport, though it is also entertainment. With the demands posed through media requests, the athlete and his staff are asked for predictions, and they are also exposed to some of the pre-bout banter. Such demands can prove distracting, and the exchanges can heighten the stress load well beyond where it should be, meaning beyond the focus on skill execution, and the months and years leading up to the monumental bout. Adding to the challenges for hometown advantaged athletes are the possible expectations of winning in front of home fans and of being favoured. For the athlete visiting the opponent's home country and city, there are questions pertaining to a lack of familiarity of media demands, weigh-in procedures, foods, and also a lack of general support from the host city. The critical focus for our team is to capitalize on the advantages we encounter through locale. For example, when travelling out of country, we often keep a low profile, share very little of our immediate plans, and during exchanges with the media we relay the message (to the opposition) that the pressure is upon the host athlete. When the bout is in our host city, the benefits include knowing the media, engaging in final preparation in a familiar environment, and being able to control the demands surrounding the bout.

Additionally, the final week is intended as a briefing period for the athlete and his coaching staff. There are typically several video sessions structured into the week, with some of the sessions targeting reminders of what to exploit and also guard against from the opponent. Video footage of our athletes, beyond the footage of opponents, is also integrated into their final week at least twice. The focus on our athlete's footage addresses strengths and memorable moments from previous bouts where particular punches and combinations were employed with athletes of similar style, speed, and overall calibre. All told, the intent through final week video sessions is to employ short sessions of 15 minutes maximum at the beginning of

a briefing session, with the footage followed up with pad work and final sparring where the briefed skills are once more pressed into action, thus reinforcing the tactical message for the bout. The intent is to polish up and entrench strategies that have been developed over the course of the training camp.

Finally, there is the weigh-in. Weigh-ins and press conferences are intended as precursors, where there is some foreshadowing of what is to follow in the bout itself. We have found that much can be learned about our own athletes and also the opponent's team, coming from the exchanges. For example, leading up to a recent bout, our athlete's opponent was being predicted as an early bout victor due to stoppage. The athlete had a record where nearly 90% of his bouts ended in stoppages, and his intent was also to stop our athlete, and subsequently earn the vacant WBC title. During the weigh-in, which is always done in a highly public setting, the two athletes faced off for the cameras, and the opponent starting speaking in our athlete's ear, intending to get under our athlete's skin. Our athlete was prepared for the opponent's tactics, as those tactics matched with the adversary's previous weigh-ins. Consequently, when the two athletes met and the exchange happened, our athlete asked his opponent to hold eye contact as opposed to speaking (without eye contact) into his ear. The moment was captured by the media, and the exchange ended with the opponent breaking off the stare, thus relinquishing superiority in the moment. The week before a world title bout is filled with such moments, and each exchange is a tactical move that fortifies or erodes at months of hard earned physical preparation.

Walking to the ring and touching gloves

When the lights dim and the music starts, the athlete is walked to the ring by his coaching staff and entourage. The anticipation is at fever's pitch, typically with 15,000 fans or more cheering or booing. One of the authors worked with a world champion where in advance of the bout there was a walk through a grand stage, with 40 musicians, singers, and dancers. The experience was uplifting for the athlete, though also extensive and time consuming. We have also encountered one experience where an athlete walked to the ring in a foreign country and fans began spitting on him. The experience was so unnerving for the athlete that more recently we seek out footage of how previous opponents in the same arena are typically treated. The walk to the ring is understood well in advance, and the factors we account for is how long the walk will take, what to expect from the audience, how long will the athlete be waiting in the ring from entry until the touching of gloves, and what tactics he might expect from the opponent. The intent is to remove the pre-bout mystique, as it is well documented that understanding one's environment (the opponent within) contributes to effective onsite adaptation (see Schinke et al., 2008). With a full appreciation of what to expect, the athlete is ready to touch gloves, apply the strategy he has internalized, and consequently deliver a performance that builds further confidence and an enhanced record.

Conclusions

The present work was developed as part of a larger instalment devoted to combative sport. Here, focus was placed on a sequence of events, as encountered by world championship boxers and those who work them. The chronology outlined was not as detailed a strategy as the one we employ when working with a world championship boxer. However, from what is provided, a general composite structure is proposed for the reader's consideration, much like the composite provided earlier for elite amateur boxing (see Schinke, 2007). However, the intention with the present work is to provide the reader with one contextual approach of how aspiring professional boxers are prepared for a particular critical moment in their sport careers: the world title bout. Through earlier manuscripts authors provided contextual insights regarding elite amateur sport, including the work of Botterill (2005), Orlick and Partington (1986) and also Schinke and da Costa (2001). The present work extends earlier discussions through a closer consideration of how one might prepare professional boxers for critical bouts, thus enhancing the likelihood that when they actually touch gloves before the first bell, they do so with intent, based upon sound knowledge and thoughtful preparation.

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Key points

- World championship boxing.
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- Athlete performance.

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