

Walker  
Research  
Group

The Role of Boxing in  
Development: A Social  
Marketing Perspective

Sport holds a privileged position within the field of development, despite a limited understanding of the role it actually plays.

Sport has also been championed as an all-purpose societal vaccine used to tackle a seemingly endless list of long-standing social problems. This is due to a tendency to mythologise sport with commonly held beliefs that sport enables social behaviour and instills fundamental values such as hard work, competitiveness, and sacrifice.

Such blind faith has, however, hindered progress towards a robust theoretical and practical understanding of the role of sport in the 'personal development' conversation.



## Two roles of sport in development

**SPORT +**

Sport Plus: prioritizes increased participation, sporting skill development, and sustainable sport organizations (development of sport), and uses sport to address broader social issues (development through sport).

Plus Sport: prioritizes certain developmental outcomes, such as the idea of behavioural change.

**+ SPORT**

## Other roles of sport in development

- 1 Sport for social inclusion: provides sporting opportunities to under-served, at risk, or disengaged groups.
- 2 Sport as diversion: involves diverting deviant behaviours with socially desirable behaviours via sport.
- 3 Sport as a hook: uses sport to attract participants, then provide core social services.

It is vital not to over-sell the value of sport as a social change mechanism, but instead genuinely reflect on where sport itself can add value to social change.

Since the exchange of value is a central marketing tenet, we view sport through this exchange-oriented lens; whereby sport can facilitate the shift from an undesirable behaviour to a desirable behaviour by meeting the needs of (or removing the barriers faced by) intended beneficiary groups.

Given that Sport Development (SD) programmes should benefit both participants and society, this exchange process is best understood as social marketing, which is defined as a process that applies marketing principles and techniques to create, communicate, and deliver value in order to influence target audience behaviours that benefit society and programme beneficiaries.

## How does boxing add value to the desired behaviours of S4D programmes that use boxing as a vehicle for social change?



The analysis consisted of data collected from: (1) The Boxing Academy (Hackney, London) and (2) Champions of Life programme (Anfield ABC, Liverpool).

Five common themes were gleaned from the data:

### 1 True Grit: A Credible Sport to Tackle Gritty Social Problems

Boxing is situated at the heart of where many social problems manifest – deprived communities across the world that face 'gritty' social issues, such as gang-related knife crime and in-school violence. Boxing adds value by being geographically accessible to deprived target groups facing such problems. The fact that boxing is both demanding and teaches fighting skills makes it a credible alternative to the 'gritty' social issues found in numerous disadvantaged communities.



Boxing was described as “a universal language” and as a “working class sport played all over the world”.

These descriptions reflect the use of boxing as a universal, neutral language that appeals to the diversity of the target groups.



There are, however other global sports, such as football, that have a greater global appeal, but the status of boxing as a working class and 'gritty' sport may better isolate the value-adding role of boxing as a robust platform for positive personal/social change.

# 2

## The Demands of Boxing: Inherent Values and Skills

Boxing is a vehicle to learn or develop values or skills, which can be used to overcome various social problems by meeting participant needs or removing barriers to achieve desired behaviours. Participants were in need of values and skills, such as discipline, mental strength, control and focus, all of which were found to be demanded by boxing participation.

Although other sports may better develop certain values and skills, such as teamwork, the demanding nature of boxing helped develop the values and skills needed by the target groups. This finding supports those published by a group of sport scientists that identified boxing as the most demanding of all sports, requiring the greatest levels of endurance, strength, power, and nerve (ESPN, 2010). The high physical demands of the sport were further confirmed by analyses of heart rates, oxygen consumption, and blood lactate responses (Ghosh, 2010).

*“... it's not like a game of football where the result doesn't just depend on you.”*

*“... boxing is about discipline and dedication, which are the values that students desperately need, no other sport can teach these values so effectively.”*

# 3

## Leaving It All in the Ring: Re-channeling Aggression

Rather than serving as a release for aggression, the role of boxing is better understood as a replacement for aggression, since the sport was found in both case studies to help angry individuals keep their cool. This finding was supported by Durrett (2010), who identified that boxing participants reported stress release as a motivation to engage in the sport. However, the catharsis theory that punching a boxing bag will reduce aggression is contrary to empirical evidence (Bushman, 2002).

*"... Boxing teaches temper control. After getting hit, you still need to control your temper otherwise you will get hurt even more." Through re-channeling aggression in to boxing and learning to keep their cool, boxing provides the target groups with "the confidence to walk away from trouble, knowing that they don't need to prove anything to themselves."*



*"... Boxing allowed me to constructively release my anger, in a way that wouldn't affect me negatively."*

# 4

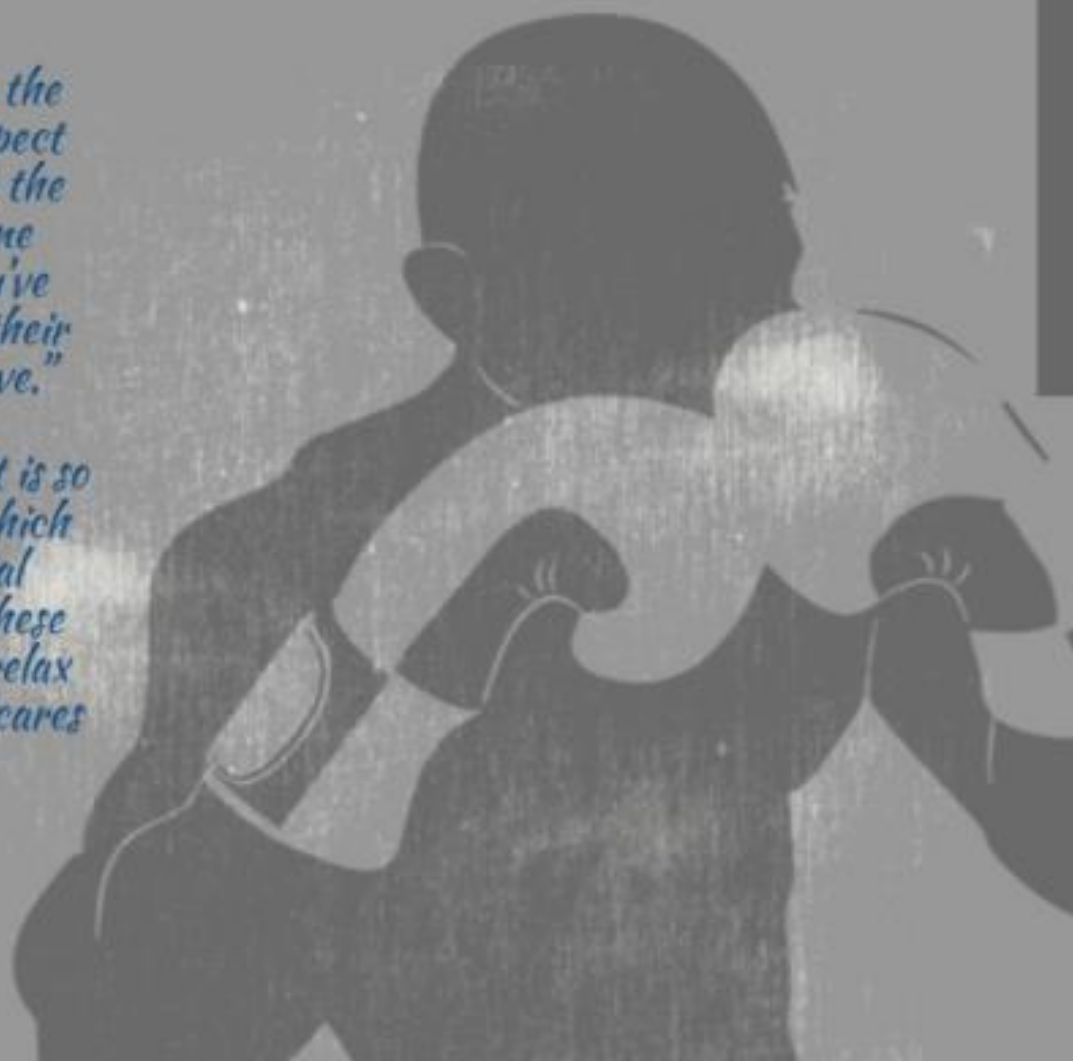
## Boxing: A Community Built on Blood, Sweat, and Tears

Across both case studies, boxing added value to the desired behaviours by meeting the target group's need for a felt sense of community. For The Boxing Academy, boxing provided a platform to build relationships (via the boxing/school community), while for Champions of Life, the boxing club family provided a new support system. The role of boxing can be viewed as a replacement because it provided a positive community in exchange of a negative community (e.g., a gang community).

While research has established that sport (in general) is an ideal vehicle to develop social capital and entrench a felt sense of community (Jarvie, 2003; Vail, 2007; Skinner, Zakus & Cowell, 2008; Sherry, 2010; Walker, 2012), boxing seemingly added more effective value than other sports because of the way the sport builds a community based on trust and mutual respect.

*"... for meeting you in the ring, you've got to respect them. You understand the pain that they've gone through as well. They've pushed themselves to their limits, just like you have."*

*"... the gym culture that is so accepting and open, which creates an easy social environment, where these children can actually relax and feel like somebody cares about them."*



In order for sport to fulfill its potential as a vehicle for development, there needs to be a shift from thinking about sport generally and instead a focus given to the unique value-adding attributes and characteristics of each sport. This study found that boxing occupies a unique position within the field of development, whereby is it ideally suited to tackle gritty social problems, engage hard to reach target groups, and develop values and skills inherent in a demanding sport.



# 5

## Walking in the Footsteps of Tough Role Models

Across both case studies, behaviour modification was facilitated via coaches serving as positive role models. Both target groups were previously influenced by negative role models such as drug dealers and gang members. Akin to other sports clubs, the boxing clubs were found to provide pro-social role models who came from the same community and suffered from (but overcame) the same challenges as the programme beneficiaries.

*"... the coaches have fighting experience [that] provides them with a toughness, a confidence and a sense of calm that allows them to handle difficult situations with difficult students and also gain respect from our students."*

*"... our coaches have got a history. They've been in the shoes of the kids, so they can understand and relate to them...having walked in their shoes, the boxing coaches understood and empathised with the target groups and in turn received their trust."*