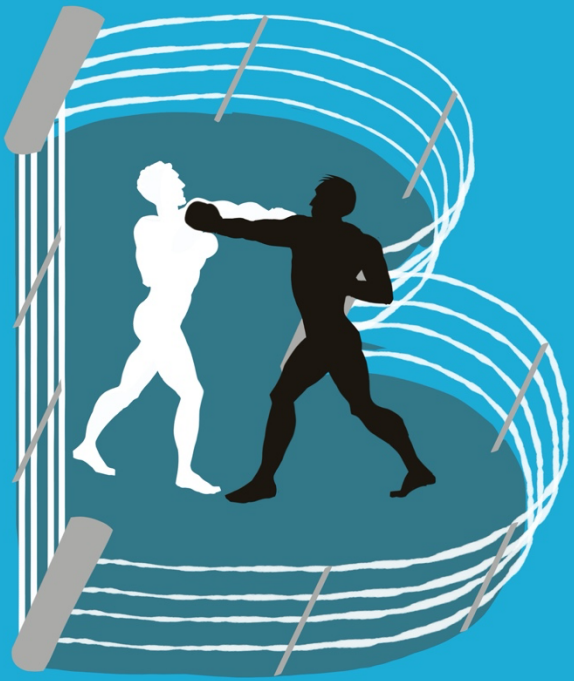
LETTERS on LIBERTY



BOXING: DON'T COUNT IT OUT

Chris Akers

LETTERS on LIBERTY

Welcome to *Letters on Liberty* from the Academy of Ideas. *Letters on Liberty* is a modest attempt to reinvigorate the public sphere and argue for a freer society.

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Since its foundation in 2000, the Academy of Ideas has hosted thousands of public debates, festivals, forums and salons where people from all walks of life come together to debate often-controversial topics and to challenge contemporary knee-jerk orthodoxies. We always hold on to one defining principle: free speech allowed.

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What are Letters on Liberty?

It's not always easy to defend freedom. Public life may have been locked down recently, but it has been in bad health for some time.

Open debate has been suffocated by today's censorious climate and there is little cultural support for freedom as a foundational value. What we need is rowdy, good-natured disagreement and people prepared to experiment with what freedom might mean today.

We stand on the shoulders of giants, but we shouldn't be complacent. We can't simply rely on the thinkers of the past to work out what liberty means today, and how to argue for it.

Drawing on the tradition of radical pamphlets from the seventeenth century onwards - designed to be argued over in the pub as much as parliament - *Letters on Liberty* promises to make you think twice. Each *Letter* stakes a claim for how to forge a freer society in the here and now.

We hope that, armed with these *Letters*, you take on the challenge of fighting for liberty.

Academy of Ideas team

BOXING: DON'T COUNT IT OUT

In May 2022, the British television programme *Good Morning Britain* hosted a debate titled: 'Boxing to discipline kids?' Its focus was to determine whether boxing brings discipline and ambition to young people, or whether it simply encourages violence. The two participants were Eddie Hearn, one of the biggest boxing promoters in the world, and Peter McCabe, the chief executive of Headway - a charity that supports people who have suffered from brain injuries.[i]

As one might expect, their perspectives on the subject were polar opposites. Hearn felt that boxing instils restraint and respect, values which other facets of society are increasingly failing to promote. McCabe, on the other hand, focused on the head trauma that boxers acquire throughout their careers, as well as the purpose of boxing: to render your opponent unconscious.

Let's dispense with the elephant in the room early on. Boxing is a dangerous sport, and the aims and objectives of combat in the ring do cause repeated trauma to the brain and other parts of the upper body. Boxing can be a bloody and brutal sport. From slurred speech to decreasing impulse control, there have been

many boxers who have suffered declining health once they have retired.

For decades, boxers have been discovered to have acquired what used to be crudely called Punch Drunk Syndrome, but is now called Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE), after they died. There are some boxers who require constant care after they retire. Numerous boxers have died in the ring, with the viciousness of their beatings beamed to millions of television sets for the purpose of entertainment.

> *Boxing has been used as the backdrop to tell stories of the human condition for thousands of years.*

It would be callous to dismiss the dangers of the sport to a boxer's life and long-term health. But it would also be remiss not to look at the context of Hearn's comments. Some might argue that, as a promoter to many of the world's best boxers, his job is to sign boxers and promote them to develop their craft and elevate their standing in the sport both competitively and financially - clearly, he would be in favour of its continuation. But that doesn't mean he's wrong.

Far from being simply a punch-up, boxing has brought freedom and liberty to its participants. It has lifted people from abject poverty, while teaching them

such virtues like discipline, hard work and respect. Boxing gyms have replaced youth clubs in many deprived areas and have fostered a sense of community and stability for people whose personal lives are chaotic and even dangerous.

Boxing has also been used as the backdrop to tell stories of the human condition for thousands of years. From modern films to tales from ancient Greece, the sport has been a platform to show how people can escape previous mistakes or desperate conditions to live fulfilling and hopeful lives. Rather than a mere violent pastime, boxing has been the means to help people escape political and legal incarceration, to cross political and religious divides, to shine a spotlight on social and political injustice and as a tool for artistic expression.

The boxing mindset

Brendan Ingle was a boxing trainer based in Wincobank in Sheffield. People would visit his gym on a regular basis, making punchbags swing like a pendulum, landing combinations onto pads with a rhythmic beat akin to a drum solo, flicking out punches with their bandaged hands towards an imaginary opponent.

Ingle trained champions at every level, most famously 'Prince' Naseem Hamed. But his coaching skills did not just extend to potential champions in the ring, he helped build champions outside it, too.

Through his teaching, Ingle instilled confidence in people whose heads were always looking at the floor. He built resilience in people who were easily anxious, and developed discipline and respect in those who previously respected no one.

Take Richard Towers, an individual who spent six and a half years in prison for being involved in a gang kidnapping. It was Ingle - and boxing in general - that helped him choose a different path to the one he was walking. In 2012, Towers won the EBU-EU (European Union) heavyweight title.

Even politicians have seen the potential for boxing to instil positive values. In the late 1890s, the former president of the United States Theodore Roosevelt resisted pressure to shut down boxing bouts while serving as police commissioner of New York City. Roosevelt himself credited boxing training with transforming him from a sickly youth to an adult in robust health, and promoted it for maintaining the health and wellbeing of American citizens. In 1918, the Hurley Boxing Law was signed, legalising boxing in New Jersey. Supporters of the Bill stated their belief

that boxing could not be considered brutal, compared to what many of them had been through during the First World War, and that, on the contrary, 'it would be beneficial to young men'.[ii]

> *More than any other sport, boxing seems to have a unique way of tapping into the consciousness of the poor, the disgruntled and the forgotten.*

The British government has also historically taken an interest in the sport. The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Boxing produced a paper called 'The Right Hook',[iii] which looked at how society benefits from the values boxing can engrain in those who learn in boxing gyms. In the report, people from the lowest rungs of society, with little in the way of hope, talk about using the sport as a way out of their environment.

Abdul Guthmy, who was pictured in the *Evening Standard* as one of the most wanted men from the London riots of 2011, moved to London from Kenya when he was a baby. Guthmy was bullied and his brothers were selling drugs at the age of 13 - he later became part of a gang. Following the riots, Guthmy walked into the Pedro Amateur Boxing Club in Hackney, and with help from his coach, he turned his life around. As a result, Guthmy started to talk about

going to university. 'He is my boxing coach, my mentor and my friend', he told the APPG, describing his relationships in the boxing gym as having a 'massive impact on my life'.

Boxing coaches wear many hats. They are parental figures, social workers and psychologists - as well as experts in their sport. They are able to relate to their boxers in ways that go beyond what can be gleaned from a coaching manual.

Gyms can act as sanctuaries from the morass and despair of people's lives. Indeed, physical training and the skill of boxing has helped oppressed groups throughout history. British Jews in the early twentieth century broke free from the slums of London's East End, defending themselves in street fights with anti-Semites. Boxing gyms like the Judean Social and Athletic Club[iv] taught young men to use the skill of boxing to win their battles - most famously at the Battle of Cable Street in 1936.[v]

More than any other sport, boxing seems to have a unique way of tapping into the consciousness of the poor, the disgruntled and the forgotten. It not only improves their physical and mental health, but gives them the confidence and skills to excel in life.

Defending boxing in an interview with the *Guardian* in 2015, Ingle said:

> *'Remember, many people have only known negative. I spend three, four, five years on them, getting them to change their attitude, go back to education, trying to motivate them. It's not easy. But I'm fed up paying taxes to keep people in prison. Surely it's much better to do something constructive with those going the wrong way so everyone will benefit?'*[vi]

Yes, the sport is dangerous. But, like Ingle, many point to the re-offending rate - particularly in young men. Instead of taking trips through the revolving door of prison, the strict rules and mindset of boxing can often be better than a spell behind bars to rehabilitate and change the attitudes of offenders.

The power of the glove

There is something heroic about the boxer - and often this heroism comes as much from their prowess in the ring as their presence outside of it. Among the many reasons Muhammad Ali is still seen as one of the most iconic athletes of all time are the political issues he raised and the principles he stood by. Highlighting the injustices faced by black people during the civil-rights movement of the 1960s - including refusing to fight in

Vietnam due to his religious beliefs and opposition to the war - he used his platform as the heavyweight champion of the world to combat restrictions on freedom and liberty.

Although Ali is the most obvious example, the use of boxing to highlight politics is nothing new. The status of world heavyweight competitions in the 1930s and 1940s helped Joe Louis to refuse to fight exhibition bouts in front of segregated audiences of soldiers during the Second World War. Governments also recognised the pull and popularity of the sport - Cuba's government used amateur boxing as a way of showcasing the ideals of the country. Until recently, a ban on professional boxing meant that Cuban boxers were often left with no option but to defect to the States. But while boxing can draw attention to political oppression, it can also be the means that people use to escape it altogether.

Lovemore N'Dou was a world-class boxer from South Africa. Growing up during Apartheid brought its challenges. Things came to a head when the police - using a law designed to imprison political activists without charge - arrested N'Dou after he was falsely accused of stealing from a supermarket. N'Dou fought back with his tongue. Beaten, and nearly left blind in one eye, N'dou's anger was building, and it needed a release.

He tried football, but didn't last long. In his own words, he was 'seen chasing other players instead of chasing the ball'. The security guard who took him off the field suggested he try his hand at boxing. The skills he developed in the ring had a profound effect on him:

> *'Boxing changed me, not only as a boxer but me as a person, because I became this calm and collected person that I am today. When I look back, and this is why I say boxing saved my life, growing up in South Africa back then, almost every teenager walked around with a knife or a gun. Chances are I could have been killed or I could have ended up in jail and not taken up boxing. So that changed me. I also made boxing my career and if I hadn't changed my attitude, I don't think I would be here today.'* [vii]

Boxing was N'Dou's avenue to escape Apartheid. After travelling to Australia to box, he decided to make the country his home. Once he and his family were settled, he moved into education and is now a trained lawyer. Boxing was the method by which he obtained a better life - escaping the future that sadly was destined for the majority of black South Africans at that time.

N'dou's boxing career helped him leave political incarceration, but the sport has also been used to navigate difficult political divides. In 1970s Belfast,

among the shells of burned-out cars and pavements strewn with broken glass, stood the Holy Family Boxing Club. Its trainer then, and now, is Gerry Storey.

The Holy Family was a downtown embassy away from the Troubles. The rule for anyone in the gym was that the world outside was left outside. The gym provided Storey with an unspoken but understood diplomatic immunity, as groups from both sides of the conflict respected him.

> *Boxing has a long history of being a conduit through which the wider public is made aware of taboo issues.*

He was summoned by the Loyalist Army Council, who supported him in his work and encouraged him to bring the kids he trained to the Rumford Social Club, a meeting place for Loyalist paramilitaries. During the 1981 Irish hunger strike, Storey was asked by both Loyalist and Republican prisoners to coach boxing in the Maze prison gymnasium. By training both Catholics and Protestants, the sport helped Storey, in the moments he was boxing, to bridge the sectarian divide.[viii]

Boxing can cut through class, race and religion - the expectation of respect for anyone who steps in the

ring gives the sport its unique power. Boxing develops individuals as fighters, as people and, crucially, inspires a sense of hope in the darkest of times.

Whether highlighting political suppression, playing a role in ending subjugation or crossing divides, boxing has a long history of being a conduit through which the wider public is made aware of taboo issues. In some cases, boxers have used the status the sport gives them to influence and instigate political change.

From Ancient Greece to Scorsese

Fans of cinema will be aware of movies like the *Rocky* franchise and *Raging Bull*. These movies used boxing as a framework to tell stories based on the human condition, as well as contentious political issues such as euthanasia (*Million Dollar Baby*) and wrongful imprisonment (*The Hurricane*).

Film may be the most well-known art form to use boxing, but it is by no means the only one. From Simon & Garfunkel's famous song about the 'poor boy' who becomes a 'fighter by his trade' to Arthur Conan Doyle's 1896 novel *Rodney Stone*, boxing has long been appropriated by artists to depict stories and issues around the world. The sport is mentioned in

both *The Iliad* and *The Aeneid*, with descriptions that have some similarities to the build-up to modern fights.

Since the late 1980s, rappers and boxers - who in some cases grow up in the same neighbourhoods - have become synonymous with each other. Rappers have accompanied some boxers to the ring as part of their entrance. In fact, ring entrances themselves are becoming more extravagant and opulent - in extreme cases, resembling Olympic opening ceremonies.

> *Budd Schulberg's quip that boxing is 'showbusiness with blood' seems pretty accurate.*

Indeed, poetry and boxing have had multiple relationships. Arthur Cravan, a Swiss poet who was the nephew of Oscar Wilde, had three professional fights - one of whom was against Jack Johnson, the first black heavyweight champion of the world. American poet and novelist Charles Bukowski included descriptions of going to boxing fights in some of his poems. To quote Ernest Hemingway: 'My writing is nothing. My boxing is everything.'[ix] Hemingway posed with boxers as a child and transformed his mother's music room into a boxing gym. Even his classic novel *The Sun Also Rises* begins

with a description of the boxing background of one of its central characters.

Artists have always been fascinated with the sport - not just by the viciousness and braggadocious behaviour displayed by boxers in the ring, but the characters who inhabit it, their backgrounds, and the rawness they espouse.

But there is also a strong relationship between art and boxers who find ways to solidify their identity and express themselves. After injuries sustained in his last fight, Michael Bentt was told by doctors that the chances of permanent brain damage would significantly increase if he ever fought again. Art played a major part in his post-ring career - he has worked with the likes of Michael Mann and Clint Eastwood, as well as directing an off-Broadway play. He recently became an adviser to an opera called *Champion*, the true story of the life of Emile Griffith, a world champion in the 1960s who was a closeted gay man.

For Bentt, art was a different avenue to express himself, after his ability in the ring was permanently taken away. Seen in this context, Budd Schulberg's quip that boxing is 'showbusiness with blood' seems pretty accurate.

The sweet science

The violence inherent in boxing, and the increased commercialisation of big fights, has meant that the sport's reputation has taken a knock of late - and calls to ban the sport have been numerous. Discussions about glove weight, CT scans and increased safety abound, with many highlighting the dangers of engaging with the sport. But what's new? The famous sports columnist Jimmy Cannon called it the 'red-light district of sports' while reporting throughout the mid 1900s.

But far from being a crude road to injury, boxing has served as a saviour to many. It has been a vehicle by which people in poverty have escaped to better surroundings, giving people an alternative path to breaking the law in order to survive. It intuitively understands those in poverty in ways no other sport can by keeping people on the straight and narrow, and helping to control their aggression. Boxing liberates individuals in ways other sports may struggle to do. The pride and honour of a boxing victory can inspire people to do great things - the romanticism of the boxing hero still serves as a vehicle of hope for many young men.

We live in contradictory times. Young people are more likely to fill their day with video games or social media - sedentary lifestyles are becoming the norm. Most of us agree that this is a bad development, yet we seem to be hellbent on neutering the joy and excitement of a sport like boxing. When youngsters do venture outside, the unruly world of knife crime, drugs or gangs has increased its pull. The self-defence and self-discipline that boxing once provided, in particular to working-class communities, seems to be in need yet again.

No doubt the governance of the sport needs to improve, and its dangers should not be downplayed. But whose right is it to stop an adult from choosing to participate in the sport? The freedom to box must be defended - it's time to put our gloves up.

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Author

Chris Akers has written about the sport of boxing for the past 15 years, covering title fights and interviewing domestic and world champions. He is the ghostwriter for the autobiography *King of the Journeymen - The Life of Peter Buckley*, which was published in 2021, and was made a member of the Transnational Boxing Rankings Board that same year. In his early thirties, he wrote and performed spoken word poetry, performing at open mics in cities such as Birmingham and Edinburgh. Outside of boxing, his interests include sports, the arts and politics - which he discusses with guests on his podcast, *The 286 Project*.

Illustrations
Jan Bowman is an artist and author of *This is Birmingham*. See her work at janbow.com

Letters on Liberty identity
Alex Dale

Pamphlet and website design
Martyn Perks

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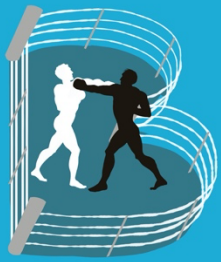

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