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I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Duncan Simpson entitled “Fail to Prepare, Prepare to Fail: Boxers’ Experiences of Training for Competition.” I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Education.

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FAIL TO PREPARE, PREPARE TO FAIL:

BOXERS' EXPERIENCES OF TRAINING FOR COMPETITION

A Dissertation
Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Duncan Simpson
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Abstract

One-on-one physical and mental competition involving the possibility of injury or even death makes combat sports good candidates for applied sport psychology interventions (Lane, 2008; Schinke, 2007). To date limited research has been conducted on the psychological demands of combat sports, particularly boxing. A few studies (Lane 2006; 2008; in press; Schinke, 2004, 2007) have focused on the researchers'/practitioners' perspective on the world of boxing, but they have failed to discuss the experiences of the participants' themselves. Some scholars in sport psychology have called for studies that 'give a voice' to marginalized or neglected groups (Fisher, Butryn, & Roper, 2003; Ryba, 2005; Ryba & Kashope-Wright, 2005; Schinke et al. 2006). As a group, boxers are among the least researched athletes within the sport psychology literature. Therefore, the primary purpose of this study was to explore boxer's experiences of training for competition. To accomplish this purpose phenomenological interviews were conducted with nine professional boxers ranging in age from 22 to 42 years. Each participant was asked to respond to the following open-ended question: "When you think of your experience of training for competition, what stands out for you?" All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Qualitative analysis of the transcripts revealed a total of 341 meaning units, which were further grouped into sub-themes and general themes. A final thematic structure revealed six major dimensions that characterized these boxers' experiences of training for competition: *Achieving Potential, Preparing, Sacrificing, Finding Support, Fearing* and *Loving/Hating.* The current study found a substantial amount of new findings not previously discussed in research. For example,

Achieving Potential was central to their experiences. They feared of losing and letting themselves and others down. Boxers had both strong positive and negative feelings towards their sport. Gym partners provided advice, bonded and provided fun and humor and yet, were needed for rivalry and competition. Lastly, the boxers wanted to know that their trainers ultimately cared about their health above all else. The results from this study offer several practical implications for trainers, boxers and sport psychology practitioners wishing to enhance the quality of the training experience for its participants.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Boxing is a combat sport that places two individuals in direct competition with each other. Two fighters are matched similarly in size (e.g., weight) and presumably physical ability. Although the physical components of fighters (e.g., coordination, balance, stamina, strength, power and speed) are important, mental strengths are also essential (Schinke, 2004). Intense one-on-one physical and mental competition in which physical injury or even death (British Medical Association, 1993) is a distinct possibility makes combat sports like boxing particularly well-suited for applied sport psychology interventions (Schinke, 2007).

Brief Review of Literature

Recently, there has been a plethora of articles examining boxing from a sociological standpoint (e.g., Boyle, Millington, & Vertinsky, 2006; Burdsey, 2007; Caudwell, 2008; Cronin, 1997; Geurts, 2005; Hargreaves, 1997; Jones, 1997; Wacquant, 1992, 1995a, 1995b, 1998, 2001, 2004). Boxing has also been depicted in films such as *Raging Bull*, *Cinderella Man*, *The Hurricane*, *Ali*, the five *Rocky* films, and *Million Dollar Baby* to name a few. In addition, countless biographies and autobiographies have been written about boxers (e.g., Hatton, 2007; Heller, 1989). The top-ranked boxers have long been the highest paid "single-event" athletes in sport (Wacquant, 1992; Kemp 2007). In 2007 alone Floyd 'Money' Mayweather reportedly made upwards of $50,000,000 for his two fights against Oscar de la Hoya and Ricky Hatton. The bout with de la Hoya set records for the biggest Pay-Per-View and live ticket sales ever in boxing (Kemp, 2007). Recent (e.g., Oscar de la Hoya, Floyd Mayweather) and former (e.g., Mike Tyson, George Foreman) boxing champions can lay claim to being among the most

recognizable athletes on the planet and Muhammad Ali, the former heavyweight titlist, may be the most famous person on earth. Yet despite the public's obvious fascination with the sport of boxing and its participants, common misconceptions and stereotypes regarding the sport still seem to exist, due in large part to Hollywood's portrayal of boxing. Critiques of films such as *Million Dollar Baby* and *Girlfight* have produced some scholarship on boxing from critical perspectives (see Boyle et al., 2006; Caudwell, 2008); however, this line of research has not addressed boxers' experiences. Although films, autobiographies, and sociological research are useful in shedding light on boxing one cannot be sure that this body of work has captured the whole experience of *being* a boxer. Despite public interest in boxing from a cinematic standpoint and the increase in sociological research examining the sport, only a few studies have explored boxing from a sport psychology perspective (Lane, 2006, 2008, in press; Schinke, 2004, 2007).

The limited scholarship available in sport psychology has focused on the researchers' (e.g., practitioners) insight into the world of boxing (Lane, 2006, 2008, in press; Schinke, 2004, 2007). Research has suggested that boxers need to be able to cope with adversity (e.g., travel, media demands, unfamiliar training venues), have a strong support system, develop an individualized training plan, conquer strict nutritional challenges, manage professional business agreements and incorporate mental preparation into their daily lives (Lane, 2006, 2008, in press; Schinke, 2004, 2007). However, this scholarship has not examined the perspectives of participants involved in the actual experience of training and competition (i.e., the boxers). For example, Schinke (2004) discussed the "barriers" to working in the sport of boxing but also identified ways in which he was able to establish a solid working relationship with boxers and

coaches over a period of time. However, Schinke (2004) did not discuss the boxers' perspectives of the relationship.

Some scholars in sport psychology have called for studies that target marginalized or neglected groups (Fisher, et al. 2003). As a group, boxers are among the least researched athletes within the sport psychology literature. Sport sociologist Loïc Wacquant (1992), who has conducted extensive field work in boxing gyms, perhaps framed this state of affairs best when he said, "Boxing presents the paradox of being the most widely recognized and popular sport worldwide and yet the most profoundly misknown" (p. 221). Before sport psychology practitioners can deliver effective psychological and emotional support for boxers, in-depth research that investigates boxers' perceptions of their world and more specifically their experiences of training for competition is needed.

Although training for competition in every professional sport requires physical and mental demands, the training involved in competitive boxing is notoriously difficult. "You win your fight in the gym" is a well-known boxing proverb. Wacquant (1994) eloquently conceptualized this very notion when he stated, "The gym is to boxing what the church is to religion" (p. 100); thus, clearly emphasizing the importance of training in a boxer's career. Most boxers train in the gym four to five times a week in addition to running on a daily basis (Scully, 2008). A professional boxer nearing a bout may train every day (Wacquant, 1992). The repetitive demands of training mean that many boxers view training as their occupation and regard the actual fight as simply a bonus for their hard work and preparation (Wacquant, 1992).

What distinguishes boxing from most other sports is the frequency of competition. Fights are staggered over a relatively long period of time to allow for adequate physical recovery. This

time span between fights can "vary from six weeks to upwards of a year for experienced successful professionals" (Schinke, 2004, ¶ 14). A vastly disproportionate amount of a boxer's career is spent in training as opposed to competition. When one considers the time spent preparing for competition by boxers compared to athletes in other professional sports, boxing is an anomaly. It could be argued that only a few other groups of professional athletes (e.g., marathon runners, tri-athletes) spend as much time training relative to the time spent in competition as boxers. So it is vital that sport psychology research focuses on the training element of boxing.

Purpose

The primary purpose of this study was to examine professional boxers' experience of training for competition from their own lived perspective. To accomplish this purpose in-depth phenomenological interviews were conducted with professional boxers.

Significance

Boxers spend a considerable amount of time training in preparation for their fights. If the fight is truly won in the gym during training as previously suggested, then research focusing on this element of a boxer's life is essential. Therefore, this research focused on the experience of boxers' training for competitions rather than on the actual fights. It was assumed that exploring boxers' experience of the training process would provide boxing trainers and sport psychology practitioners with a perspective that could not be achieved simply through observation. The intent of this study was not only to inform the researcher and trainer of the athletes' experience but to also assist the athletes in understanding and bringing meaning to the training situations they have experienced in their boxing careers.

Assumptions

For the purposes of this study, two assumptions were identified. First, it was assumed that participants had the ability to reflect and articulate accurate, honest, and open accounts of their experiences. Secondly, it was assumed that the experience of training for competition transcended boxing related issues and encompassed many life issues outside of the sport.

Limitations

The outcomes of the study are limited in at least three ways. First, it is possible that the co-participants were not completely honest and/or accurate when recalling and discussing their experiences of training for competition. Secondly, the results pertain only to the experiences of male professional boxers due to the lack of availability of and access to female professional boxers. Lastly, there is a lack of diversity in the sample with regards to the race/ethnicity of the co-participants.

Delimitations

The co-participants were delimited to currently active boxers with professional fight records. The primary difference between boxers is their status as either amateur or professional. Although both categories of status are inextricably linked, with most amateurs having the desire to turn professional (even if few succeed), the two are very different. Not only does economic potential differentiate the two groups but also the vast differences in rules and regulations make the "divisions almost two different sports" (Wacquant, 1992, p. 234). Due to the importance of the spoken word in phenomenological research and the first language of the researcher (i.e., English) all participants were English speaking. Lastly, recruitment of co-participants only took place in the Southeastern region of the United States and the United Kingdom.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Overview

While boxing is virtually unrepresented in the sport psychology literature a plethora of research articles, books and films has examined the sport from a variety of other perspectives. In order to provide a context for this existential phenomenological study a review of the existing research on boxing from a variety of fields in sports academia is provided in this chapter. The review is partitioned into two parts. Part One addresses (a) the physical components of boxing training, and (b) the psychological aspects of training. Part Two contains discussion of (a) the social world of boxing, and (b) broad societal and cultural issues associated with the sport. Taken together, this review represents an analysis and synthesis of previous research and other scholarship relevant to the research question, "What is the experience of professional boxers in training for competition?" Although each topic is allocated its own section it is not the researcher's intention to present them as individual and discrete lines of research but as interdependent elements that often intersect and affect the life of a boxer.

Part One: Physical Components of Boxing Training

In order to facilitate an understanding of the experience of boxing training it is important to provide a brief analysis of the training process. Most professional boxers train four to five times a week, although a professional nearing a fight may train every day (Wacquant, 1992). Based on the boxing literature (e.g., Anderson, 1991; Scully, 2008) there are four specific areas of training: "floor-work," "ring-work," "body-work," and "road-work." Seven basic components of training are incorporated within the four areas. These include: *stationary/heavy bag* and *speed*

bag/*double-end bag* (floor-work), *shadow-boxing* and *sparring* (ring-work), *jump rope* and *stomach/neck exercises* (body-work), and *running* (road-work).

Floor-work. Boxers engage in two primary types of floor-work: stationary/heavy bag and speed bag/ball. The stationary or heavy bag is a large weighted punch bag that is usually hung from the ceiling. When using this piece of equipment boxers continually punch the bag in set combinations. Specific targets can be drawn on the bag to replicate areas of the opponent's body (e.g., trunk and head). Although the bag may move slightly the weight of the bag keeps it fairly stationary, allowing the boxer to develop fundamental punching techniques with the coach's assistance (Bresnahan, 2003). Hitting a weighted target also helps to develop the specific muscles required for effective punches (Bresnahan, 2003).

The speed bag is a smaller air-filled bag approximately the size of a human head. It is usually anchored to a rebound platform that is parallel to the ground. As its name suggests, the speed bag rebounds extremely quickly after it has been hit. The boxer continually punches the speed bag to develop "quick hands" while also attempting to keep his/her hands up, which is a fundamental component of boxing defense (Kahn, 2003). Similar to the speed bag is the double-end bag or focus bag, which is another lightweight bag attached to both the floor and ceiling with elastic fixes. Once hit, this training bag moves in a number of directions requiring the boxer to maintain good footwork and punch accurately (Kahn, 2003). Due to the quick movements of the lighter weight bags, novices rarely train with them until they acquire sound punching technique.

Ring-Work. During ring-work training partners practice their boxing skills in a ring environment (Enamait, 2003). Boxers engage in two different types of ring-work: sparring and shadow-boxing. Sparring is best described as "practice-fighting" and is a "hybrid" of training

and competition. The primary purpose of sparring is to closely simulate a competitive bout while simultaneously achieving training objectives and avoiding injury (Anderson, 1991). Sparring is usually conducted with safety equipment and may incorporate "special rules" such as no head punches to prevent injury to a boxer prior to competition. Sparring provides an environment where the boxer can attempt to implement other training techniques (e.g., punch combinations) in a simulated competitive situation (Anderson, 1991; Enamait, 2003). Sparring can also take the form of "mitt-work" where a trainer wears boxing mitts the boxer attempts to hit in a series of punch combinations. This type of training is often conducted in the ring with the trainer attempting to simulate an opponent's moves to facilitate the boxer's recognition of particular punching patterns. Wacquant (1992) eloquently suggests that "sparring is an education of the senses and notably of visual faculties; the state of emergency it creates effects a progressive reorganization of perceptual abilities and habits" (p. 244).

Shadow-boxing or shadowing is an exercise in which the boxer practices certain technical elements of his/her fight plan on his/her own (Enamait, 2003). Shadow boxing involves a simulation of a fight with the boxer throwing punches at an imaginary opponent. This activity is often performed in front of a mirror so that the boxer can make technical adjustments based on the visual feedback s/he receives (Anderson, 1991). This exercise can help a boxer develop technical skills as well as improve physical endurance. Shadowing requires a boxer to monitor and synchronize every part of his/her body for various actions including the placement, orientation, and spacing of the feet; overall balance and muscle tension; and height, speed and position of the hands, elbows, and chin (Scully, 2008). At the same time the boxer might

imagine an opponent on the offensive or defensive in order to make the exercise more realistic (Wacquant, 1995b).

Both sparring and shadowing incorporate virtually all the skills necessary for competition. They are the most "competition-like" forms of training and help to develop the correct modes of fitness necessary for boxing (Enamait, 2003). As sparring and shadowing incorporate so many different elements, it is rare for novice boxers to engage in either type, especially sparring, until they have developed a competent skill set.

There is a common misconception that training for boxers consists mainly of punching an opponent continuously in sparring sessions. In reality boxers spend only a small fraction of their training time facing a live opponent or partner but rather they work on conditioning or technical elements of their craft. Like most professional athletes, boxers know that physical conditioning is vital for performance success. Boxers need to get themselves in the best possible physical shape in order to execute their technical skills effectively in competition. The training within the ring is the final piece that allows boxers to pull together all the other components of training in one exercise (Anderson, 1991).

Body-work. Perhaps the most commonly used method of body-work in boxing is jump roping. This exercise is designed to improve a boxer's physical fitness, footwork, coordination and rhythm. Jump roping is also used as a primary exercise to facilitate weight loss closer to a bout. Other body exercises are abdominal and neck exercises. Abdominal exercises are designed to strengthen the trunk area to allow it to withstand "body-shots" in a fight. Strong abdominals also protect the vital organs from serious damage and enable a boxer to generate more power in his/her punches, particularly those involving the rotation of the trunk for "hooks"

and “straights” (Scully, 2008). Neck exercises are usually performed with weights hanging from a helmet. As the head area is the primary target during boxing contests, boxers must strengthen their neck muscles to avoid serious injury during fights and withstand the torque of punches (Wacquant, 1995b).

Physical training in boxing not only builds specific strength in parts of the body that need the most protection (shoulders, abdominals, and biceps), but also builds endurance and punching power (Wacquant, 1995b). Due to the muscular physical appearance of most boxers it is fair to assume that they engage in heavy weightlifting exercises. However, this is contrary to the truth; “trainers are almost universally dead-set against weightlifting which they argue makes fighters ‘muscle-bound’ and impairs their hand speed, resilience, and agility” (Wacquant, 1995b, p. 71). A boxer’s physicality comes mainly from the other types of exercises (e.g., sparring, heavy bags, push-ups, abdominal exercises, etc) (Enamait, 2005)

Road-work. Road-work or running is the final discipline in a boxer’s training. Running is used to develop cardiovascular endurance, which allows a boxer to compete in long bouts (Scully, 2008). A championship professional boxing bout consists of 12 three-minute rounds with a one-minute interval between rounds. Non-championship professional bouts are fought over four, six or eight rounds. As professional boxers sometimes compete at a high intensity for as long as 36 minutes they need high levels of both aerobic and anaerobic fitness as well as muscular endurance.

The repetitive demands of this training mean many boxers simply view training as their “work” (Wacquant, 1992, p. 238). The devotion and investment needed to be a boxer both inside and outside of the gym “can make the life of the professional fighter a truly harsh existence”

(Wacquant, 1992, p. 238). However, this does not mean that training is without its elements of fun as many social friendships are developed in the gym (Wacquant, 1992). One can also take a physical pleasure in seeing his or her body (the fighter's "capital") developing as a result of training (Wacquant, 1992). In turn, this physical capital may be utilized to gain economic capital in the form of winning fights as well as social capital where a muscular body can bring status in a one's peer group and potentially sexual partners.

The preceding analyses partitioned training into separate components and provided a generic overview of the typical components of boxing training. However, in addition to the physical aspects of boxing training are the psychological aspects. These are discussed next.

Part One: Psychological Aspects of Training

"Boxing is brain over brawn. I don't care how much ability you've got as a fighter. If you can't think, you're just another bum in the park" (Ray Arcel cited in Anderson, 1991, p. 121). An old proverb also suggests that boxing is "seventy-five percent physical and seventy-five percent mental" (Wacquant, 1995a, p. 503). Perhaps not surprisingly, recent research has suggested there is need for individuals with applied training in sport psychology within combative sports in general (e.g., Galloway, 2006), and boxing in particular (Lane, 2006, 2008, in press; Schinke, 2004; 2007). Schinke (2007) suggests that "combative sports are perhaps, among the most suited disciplines for applied sport psychology" (p. 1). The generic psychological skills that appear to be important for boxers include confidence, commitment, determination, focus, and managing emotions. In this section a range of mental skills relevant to boxing and some ways these mental skills might affect the overall experience of a boxer training for competition are discussed.

Building confidence. Confidence plays an integral role in all types of sport performance but it could be argued that the nature of individual sports requires an extra emphasis on this mental component due to the one-on-one nature of the contest. Individual sport athletes don't have the luxury of relying on teammates to bolster confidence. The close proximity and direct physical contact of combat sports like boxing accentuate any deficiencies in the boxer's physical and mental preparation.

Milton (2005) suggests that combative fight preparation presents a paradox for participants that pits becoming more determined and confident and becoming more nervous against each other. The constant threat of physical injury suggests boxers need to be confident enough to be able to put their health at risk. Confidence can also play a crucial role in decision-making during a fight with regard to the type and range of punches thrown (Hristovski, Davids, Araújo & Button, 2006). Confidence is a pervasive element of every boxer's experience of training from decisions as to how far to run during road work to the selection of sparring partners.

Developing discipline and commitment. The intense boxer's diet can produce tremendous psychological suffering (Wacquant, 1995a). "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" (Wacquant, 1995, p. 77). The whole gym environment also demands constant discipline from the boxer in terms of training and obedience to rules (Wacquant, 1992). Boxing is a sport that demands a strict commitment from its participants. Although other sports require some degree of commitment, boxing training is notoriously difficult and requires extraordinary levels. Wacquant (1995) eloquently emphasizes the demands of boxing by stating "one does not

'play' at boxing" (p. 496). This suggests that participants need to be serious and committed to their sport; otherwise, success is unlikely and the possibility of serious injury is magnified. Possible physical injuries include black eyes, cuts, broken noses, bruised ribs and kidneys. Thus, the devotion and personal investment needed both inside and outside of the gym "can make the life of the professional fighter a truly harsh existence" (Wacquant, 1992, p. 238).

Managing emotions. Milton (2004) reported that the participants in his study (Mixed Martial Arts, MMA) felt states of fearlessness before fights yet also worried about complacency and being "too" calm. He found that nerves were a frequent and familiar experience for most fighters as was embarrassment over losses. Wacquant (1992) states that "the boxer must be capable of managing his emotions and know, according to the circumstances, how to contain or repress them or, on the contrary, how to trigger and fuel them" (p. 245). Boxers also need to show emotional control within the ring (Lane, 2008; Schinke, 2007) "so as never to let their opponent know if and when they are hurt by punches" (Wacquant, 1992, p. 245). This ability to control and conceal emotions is not innate but is acquired through the discipline of sparring (Wacquant, 1992).

Using social support. Boxer's energy demands are enormous. Therefore, a boxer's "team," consisting of trainers, corner-men and cut-men, play an important role in mentally preparing the boxers for competition (Milton, 2005; Schinke, 2007). Due to the strict life-discipline required to become a professional boxer, it is essential that the boxer has people in his/her social support structure that understand the demands of the sport (Lane, in press). Unlike the training team, a boxer's family members, partners, and friends may not completely understand the demands of the sport yet are in some ways affected by his/her required lifestyle

(e.g., strict diet, sexual abstinence, sleep patterns, training demands). All these potential social influences are an important component of boxers' experience of training for competition.

Enhancing life skills. Research has suggested that boxers can struggle with the transition from a professional fight into routine daily life after the fight (Milton, 2005). The high energy levels required in daily training leading up to a fight are diminished in routine life and boxers may often feel a "down" after competition. There is also an "un-written" rule that boxers don't take their outside problems and obligations into the gym (Wacquant, 1992). While this might be expected it is often difficult to observe. Thus, it is important to consider how well boxers are managing their life circumstances when examining their experience of training for a competition. As Schinke (2004) suggests:

> The big picture part of performance is built through 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. (¶ 25)

Dealing with injury. The reality of boxing suggests that injuries are an integral part of the sport. Despite safety measures (e.g., larger/more padded gloves, rules governing knock-downs and medical examinations) the possibility of being injured can never be completely eliminated. Mental skills training has been found to be effective in helping athletes deal with injury rehabilitation (Wiese & Weiss, 1987). Since the potential for injury is an integral part of a boxer's experience of training it is reasonable to presume that the boxer's ability to deal with injuries is an important psychological skill to possess.

Developing control. Schinke (2007) suggests "boxing is a sport founded on control, control of oneself, control of the other, control over the judges, and consequently control over the outcome" (p. 1). A flurry of aggressive punches during a round may seem incongruous with notion of control so the idea of the "controlled athlete" requires constant emphasis. Schinke (2007) points out that a boxing match is a continual struggle for control and that when one boxer controls the ring the other is being controlled. Thus, the perception of control is a constant challenge to a boxer's confidence.

At times, it may be appropriate for a boxer to relinquish some control to the opponent in order to defend properly or regain equilibrium. Boxers need to know how to negotiate the notion of control in order to facilitate their performance. As Schinke (2004) contends:

> 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. (¶ 2)

Dealing with adversity. A boxer who suffers defeat can be affected in three primary ways: (a) a defeat on the fighter's performance record can affect progress towards title fights and higher income, (b) if the fighter is seriously injured in defeat it can take considerable time to recover, and (c) it can create emotional and psychological struggles that can that diminish confidence (Schinke, 2004). Some have argued that it is these emotional and psychological struggles that can be the most telling on the subsequent training experience and quality of future performances (Lane, in press). Concerning the theme of adversity Schinke (2004) suggests that defeat is not the only challenge: "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" (¶ 12). Therefore, it is important for fighters to be able to deal productively with adversity in order to advance their careers.

Goal-setting. Goal-setting is likely to affect what a boxer chooses to do during training, thus influencing his/her experience. Lane (2006; 2008; in press) has consulted with both amateur and professional boxers and suggests that videotaping sparring sessions is a helpful way achieving the goal of increased self-efficacy. The use of video allows the boxer to evaluate his/her strengths and limitations and target areas for improvement. Lane (2006) has also used video analysis to focus on the relative strengths and weaknesses of a boxer's opponent. This analysis consisted of counting the type and direction of the punches thrown and in what time period they were thrown within a round. This type of analysis could highlight any particular patterns or tendencies an opponent might have. Once these patterns have been identified a boxer can set particular goals to expose potential weaknesses. For example, if video analysis shows an opponent constantly drops his/her right hand then the goal for his/her opponent would be to throw 20/30 more left jabs per round.

The psychological skills discussed in this section represent a sampling and not a complete list of skills that may be useful for boxers who are training for a competition. For example, the foundational mental skills of *relaxation* and *visualization* would obviously be helpful in preparing fighters for the physical and mental demands of competition. It is also important to note that the physical process of *doing* the training cannot be fully understood without some knowledge of the social context within which the training occurs. The context of the professional boxer's world is the focus of the next section.

Part Two: The Social World of Boxing

The business and the gym. An existential-phenomenological research approach presumes that individuals cannot be described objectively and that all experience takes place within a context, and that this context includes others (i.e., society) (Fletcher & Milton, 2007). It is the society or culture of individuals that "provides the framework in which individuals live out their lives and find their identities" (Matthew, 2002, p. 125). Thus, boxers are assumed to operate within a culture and society in what Merleau-Ponty calls a "knot of relations" (Thomas, 2005, p. 69). Matthews (2002) also suggests "none of us lives an entirely solitary existence" (p. 114) therefore, boxers can't avoid being influenced by others in their social world. According to existential phenomenologists, the four "grounds" of human existence are World, Body, Time, and Others (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). What becomes important in a person's experiences usually emerges against one or more of these grounds.

Others and the business side of boxing. Professional boxing has been termed an "ill-reputed business" (Wacquant, 1998, p. 1) where individuals play various roles and attempt to squeeze as much money out of the industry as possible. Managers, promoters and match-makers all take a cut of the prize money, which often leaves little left for the boxer. Most fighters recognize that their "services are grossly underpaid" (Wacquant, 1998, p. 26). However, they also realize that if they "voice their disgruntlement too loudly" they are likely to lose their protected status and become just another "piece of meat on the market" (Wacquant, 1998, p. 22). It is also important to note that a boxer's entire career and earning potential can drastically change on the basis of the results of a single contest (Lane, in press). This strong association

between performance and earning potential might be expected to exert significant pressure on a boxer.

Some have compared the life of a professional boxer to that of a prostitute with the boxer's managers, promoters, and match makers being the pimps (Wacquant, 1998, 2001). Like many prostitutes it is easy for boxers to be manipulated by others in their industry because boxers usually are uneducated and come from poor backgrounds (Wacquant, 1992). The startling comparisons of boxing to the slave trade (Jefferson, 1998; Wacquant, 1998, 2001) make some critics question the social value of the sport, but to do so undermines the agency and autonomy that boxers have in their decision-making. While existential phenomenologists would probably support Wacquants' (1998) notion that athletes do not have complete free will in their social world, they would also reject the idea that athletes can be completely objectified and have no free will at all (Dale, 1996). Instead, it would be presumed that the boxer has "situated freedom" that allows choices within the framework of the given situation their world has presented (Valle, King, & Hallings, 1989). For example, it could be argued that boxers are "holders of and even entrepreneurs in bodily capital" (Wacquant, 1995b, p. 60). Their bodies become their "means of production" (Wacquant, 1995b, p. 18) and they are well aware of their dependency on a fit and healthy body. With almost obsessive discipline boxers take care of and develop their bodies in two ways (1) in the gym through hard physical work, and (2) outside of the gym through life sacrifices.

The world of the gym. Wacquant's (1992) description of the Chicago boxing gym is reminiscent of Foucault's (1977) conceptualization of the "panopticon." Dee Dee, the head trainer at the Woodlawn Boys Club, takes up residence in an office that overlooks the gym floor

and reprimands any boxer who slacks off in training (Wacquant, 1992). The perception of constant surveillance results in the boxers continuously working hard, just as the panopticon structure of some prisons is designed to maintain discipline as everyone believes that they are being watched (Foucault, 1977). The prison theme continues in Wacquant's (1992) description of the boxing gym in which "all entries to the building are protected by metal bars and solidly padlocked" (p. 228). It is ironic that working-class boxers can enter the gym in order to escape the dangers of the street and thus potentially avoid going to prison yet simultaneously be entering another type of prison environment within the gym. The description of the gym provides images of a protected environment in "which external events rarely penetrate" (Wacquant, 1992, p. 229). The gym therefore functions as a self-contained unit that "buffers" the "attractions and dangers of the ghetto" (Wacquant, 1992, p. 230). The gym also functions as a social center where boxers train and engage in a type of social contact rarely seen on the streets. Thus, the structure and concept of a boxing gym provides multiple meanings to its inhabitants.

According to Wacquant (1992) the gym structure appears to be "egalitarian" in some contexts with members being treated basically alike by the coaches (p. 234). Although professionals may experience a more structured and demanding work-out than the amateurs do, everybody is treated the same as long as they "pay their dues" (Wacquant, 1992, p. 234). However, a very definite hierarchical power structure exists within boxing gyms with the head coach holding the position at the top of the structure.

Similar to the prison environment the boxing gym is also controlled by a vast array of rules and regulations. For example, in Stoneland's South side gym in Chicago there are many rules prohibiting actions such as cursing, smoking, loud talking, disrespecting women,

disrespecting coaches and disrespecting each other, animosity, and bragging (Wacquant, 1992). As with other elements of gym life the strict rules are internalized by the regulars and are rarely violated (Wacquant, 1995a). The boxers in Wacquant's (1992) study often compare these elements of gym life to being in the military. A Marxist perspective might suggest that the boxing industry provides a "convenient ideology that gives the men hope for success" (Krueger & SaintOnge, 2005, p. 188) while ensuring that they continue to work hard in lower echelons of boxing. In turn this provides a constant pool of individuals willing to work for little money. Although not every boxing gym may fit his description it is important to consider the gym environment in which the boxers train every day when examining their experiences of training.

Descriptions of the social world of boxing (e.g., Wacquant, 1992) have been provided by some researchers with markedly different classes and racial backgrounds than those of the boxers. Thus, it is possible that these differences may have affected how the researcher perceived the boxer's world and also how the boxers related to the researcher. For example, Frenchman Loïc Wacquant in his three year ethnographic study in a Chicago boxing gym neglected to address how he managed his class, racial and cultural biases when studying boxers. Instead, Wacquant, (1998) suggested he was allowed into their world by "paying one's dues in the ring" (p. 4).

A time for bodily sacrifice. The boxer's extreme dedication to the sport can be interpreted as a positive attribute or as a deviant form of "overconformity." However, boxers are unlikely to see such overconfirmity as deviant but rather as a confirmation of their identity (Coakley, 2004). The world of a boxer seems to be dominated by the context of the gym and the concept of sacrifice. Everything connected to the body must be controlled – nutrition, sleep, rest

and sex (Wacquant, 1995b; Scully, 2008). A boxers' social life is part of the ongoing sacrifice that must be made to reach the top. Boxers ideally fight "at the upper limit of the lowest weight category that their body can reach without sapping its strength" (Wacquant, 1995b, p. 76). Due to the strict weight categories boxers must adhere to, they are in a constant battle with food, which makes the intense training agony (Wacquant, 1995b). The theme of sacrifice seems to run through every facet of a boxer's life both in and outside the gym. It is ironic that boxers are required to abstain from drinking alcohol and sexual activity even though these social behaviors are often cultural symbols of what "real men" do. So although boxers are often portrayed as the most masculine of men they must simultaneously resist the most masculine of pastimes. Abstinence from sexual activity in order to conserve energy is probably the most interesting of all sacrifices. Sexual activity is said to result in a loss of "snap" in punches, makes the boxers "too relaxed" and "weakens" them (Wacquant, 1995b pp. 79-80). As with every athlete, transgressions from a committed lifestyle are likely to happen so despite the training ideology, behavior is not so neatly controlled (Hoffman & Fine, 2005). Having at least some knowledge of these sacrifices, however, helps to provide a context within which to understand boxers' experiences of training for competition.

Bodily injuries. Physical injuries, including black eyes, cuts, broken noses, bruised ribs and kidneys, are an accepted part of boxing but this does not mean that the injuries don't hurt or that the boxer doesn't need physical courage to continually put his or her body on the line. Wacquant, (1995) conceptualizes this bodily sacrifice as follows: "the boxer willfully perseveres in this potentially self-destructive trade because, in a very real sense, he is inhabited by the game he inhabits" (p. 88). This conceptualization is similar to Merleau-Ponty's concept of "being."

"That we are not outside of or on the margins of being, but are obviously, undeniably, and squarely situated within it" (Primozic, 2001, p. 58). Thus, it might be presumed that boxers are very aware of their place in the boxing world and how their body is being used and damaged in that world.

Part Two: Broad Societal and Cultural Issues Associated with Boxing

Existential phenomenologists hold that it is impossible to fully understand a person's experience without considering the society and culture within which the person exists; that is, "perception of a given entity cannot be fully understood without knowing something of the specific culture" (Thomas, 2005, p. 69). Thus, when examining boxers' experience of training it is important to recognize the boxer's culture and its relationship to boxing, as culture "is not an encapsulated entity but one that grounds all that we see and do" (Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997, p. 8). The notion of an non-encapsulated entity is further supported by the idea that "the situation in which an individual finds himself or herself is in part a social one" (Matthew, 2002, p. 124). As spectators or "outsiders" to boxing it is likely researchers who attempt to interpret the sport differ in many ways from those who participate. This point is highlighted by Matthews (2002) who states that "we *experience* the world, each from his or her own point of view; we are not simply passively affected by it" (p. 115). Merleau-Ponty would likely contend that boxing and the experiences of its participants cannot be explained and cannot exist "outside of its wider social and political context" (Cronin, 1997, p. 144). Therefore, in the following sections some of the broad societal and cultural issues associated with boxing are discussed.

Socioeconomic status and sporting opportunity. In order to fully address the experiences of boxers in training for competition it is important to discuss the socioeconomic backgrounds of the participants. It has consistently been demonstrated that male boxers come almost exclusively from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Donnelly, 1998; Jones, 1997; Mennesson, 2000; Weinberg & Arnold, 1952). This may, in part, be due to the fact that there is "no direct economic barrier to boxing" (Wacquant, 1992, p. 232), as there are in other sports (e.g., golf and tennis) where financial obstacles can prevent the lower-classes from participating. It should be noted however that a visible minority of boxers come from middle-class backgrounds (Wacquant, 2004), although the existing research has so far failed to address the involvement of this group of boxers (Hoffman & Fine, 2005).

Economic circumstances that continually limit and frame the choices available to the lower-classes make boxing "a residual but important form of cultural expression" (Donnelly, 1998, p. 343). The opportunities for financial gain, to become famous, and to enhance social status are motivating factors for many lower-class boxers to enter the ring (Sammons, 1990). Although only a few exceptional athletes achieve the fame and fortune they are seeking (Sugden, 1997), "over 80 percent of active professional fighters in Chicago subscribe to the idea that boxing offers a viable avenue out of poverty" (Wacquant, 1995a, p. 504). Few people outside the sport truly know the personal price boxers pay to pursue their dreams. Few realize "the drab and obsessing daily routine of work-outs, of the endless and thankless preparation, inseparably physical and moral, leading to the all-too-brief appearance in the limelight" (Wacquant, 1992, p. 223).

The middle-lower class. It is important to differentiate boxers from others within the same generalized socioeconomic background, as boxers "do not generally come from the most disenfranchised fractions of the ghetto subproletariant" (Wacquant, 1992, p. 232). It appears that most professional boxers come from traditional working-class backgrounds and not from the most "disorganized and desocialized" (Wacquant, 1992, p. 233) underclass in society. The demands of boxing training require the "habits and values" (Geurts, 2005, p. 145) associated with working-class traditions. Discipline, hard work, and structure are values that working-class participants even crave (Jones, 1997). Wacquant (1995) eloquently emphasizes the demands of boxing by stating "one does not 'play' at boxing" (p. 496). Boxing requires a high degree of self-determination as there is "no place to hide in the ring" (Wacquant, 1995a, p. 515). The discipline and structure required of professional boxers is likely beyond the capabilities of the lowest echelons of society where the greatest need is to make ends meet at the end of the month (Valentine, 1978). In his ethnographic study of a Chicago South side boxing gym Wacquant (1992) concluded that "the educational, employment, and economic status of professional pugilists is somewhat higher than that of the average ghetto resident" (p. 233). Lastly boxers differentiate themselves from other ghetto members by "belonging to at least one formal organization-the boxing gym" (Wacquant, 1992, p. 233). It is not the intent of the present researcher to suggest that boxing and its participants are particularly different and/or special when compared to other professional sports and athletes but rather to emphasize the point that contextual factors might be expected to affect how a boxer interprets his/her experiences of training for competition.

The boxer's body as physical capital. Boxers' "investment" in their own bodies might also be conceptualized as "physical capital," which is often highly valued by males in the working classes (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986). Pierre Bourdieu's concept of physical capital refers to any asset used for the production of economic capital. Therefore, it might be argued that a boxer uses his or her body as a means of production in order to earn money. Since an individual's body is inextricably linked to his or her racial and/or ethnic background and possibly his/her nationality it is appropriate to consider how these factors might also affect the boxer's sporting identity.

Ethnicity and boxing style. Boxers of various ethnic backgrounds have been stereotyped to use different fighting styles. For example, *Latino's* have the reputation of being very aggressive fighters, *Black* and *White* boxers adopt a more technical style, and *Mexicans* are known for being tough (Jesse Ravelo cited in Heiskanen, 2006). These imputed reputations have the potential to alter how boxers are perceived by others in the industry and may even alter boxers' interpretations of themselves and their experiences. This "shaping of identities" may prompt boxers to develop what Bourdieu (1980) calls "competitive sports habitus". Bourdieu (1980) theorized that "habitus" is a system of dispositions that are open to modification, meaning that identities can change. However, this will only occur if an individual internalizes the habitus society projects for them. In a similar vein, interactionists suggest that people make sense of their personal identity on a micro-level through human interactions (Coakley & Dunning, 2002). This concept of a competitive sporting habitus is highlighted by professional boxers such as Oscar de la Hoya (Latino) and Barry McGuigan (Northern Irish) who accept their respective stereotypes and portray themselves as symbols of and role models for their ethnic communities

(Delgado, 2005; Hassan, 2005). Conversely, Wayne McCullough, a Protestant from Northern Ireland, "had to jettison his own political/cultural identity" (Cronin, 1997, p. 133) in order to fight for the nation-state of Ireland in the 1992 Olympics. The process of identity formation for many boxers is made through participation in their sport, particularly as they try to "make sense of their work, lives and the outside world…consequently, the notion of 'being a fighter' determines many boxers' self-conceptualization" (Heiskanen, 2006, p. 484).

Masculinity and boxing. Boxing has always been characterized as a symbol of masculinity. Terms such as "the noble art of self-defense," "the sweet science," and "the manly art" have been commonly used to describe the sport, thus promoting notions of "courage, determination and self-discipline" (Hargreaves, 1997, p. 34). Conventional sporting ideology suggests that boxing is quintessentially masculine due to its associations with the male physique and psyche (Hargreaves, 1997). Everything associated with boxing- violence, blood, bruises, cuts and danger is widely regarded as "natural" for men (Messner, 1992) and is placed in stark contrast "with the essence of femininity" (Hargreaves, 1997, p. 35). Clearly, then, boxing might be considered an "important form of cultural expression" (Donnelly, 1988, p. 343) and a vehicle by which boxers form their personal and sporting habitus (Bourdieu, 1985). Given the "hypermasculinity" of the sport, habitus might also be linked to gender identity. While the upper and middle-classes are able to define their masculinity in other areas of their life, boxing may be the only viable and lawful outlet where working-class males can construct and validate their masculine identity (Wacquant, 1995a). While it is beyond the scope of this review to examine the varied and complex issues surrounding the gender identity of athletes, it is assumed that gender role identity could play a role in the way boxers experience training for competition.

The boxer's physical identity. How boxers identify themselves in a physical sense can take many forms. For example, a boxer's physical identity is constructed in part through his/her choice of "trunks, robes and fight paraphernalia" (Heiskanen, 2006, p. 491). Such choices allow boxers to construct their own individualistic identity within the larger identity of "being a boxer." Another way they do this is through the use of nicknames. Examples include "*Iron*" Mike Tyson, Ricky "*The Hitman*" Hatton, Arturo "*Thunder*" Gatti, Bernard "*The Executioner"* Hopkins and Laila "*She Bee Stingin"* Ali. It would be intriguing to investigate the meanings each athlete attaches to his/her nickname, how these meanings manifest themselves in the boxer's identity, and how a boxer's identity might be altered by the nickname he/she chooses.

Categorization of fighters. Wacquant, (1998) suggests that there are three categories of boxers: "protected," "journeymen," and "bums" (p. 6). Protected boxers are usually deemed as those with potential to advance to the top of the sport (e.g., prospects or contenders) so their careers are carefully choreographed by their managers and promoters in order to give them the best opportunity to succeed (Wacquant, 1998). Journeymen are seen as reliable and capable fighters "whose main role is to help build the record and career of the protected fighter" (Wacquant, 1998, p. 6). Bums are regarded as the lowest level boxer, known to take dives and used only as a last resort by promoters. The manager's and promoter's perceptions of a boxer's ability of can shape the boxer's career by affecting the types and frequency of fights s/he gets. If a boxer accepts the categorization of the manager or promoter it can produce a "self-fulfilling prophecy" that affects the boxer's goals, aspirations, and self-confidence. For example, if a promoter and manager predict the fighter will be a "bum" and the boxer identifies with this

expectation, it is likely s/he will under-train and under-perform, thus validating the prophecy. Thus, it is possible that a boxer's categorization may play an important role in how the boxer perceives his/her experience of training for competition.

Summary

The world of boxing might be summarized as "a little-known universe on which factual misconceptions are as abundant as rigorously collected data are scant" (Wacquant, 1992, p. 38). Despite its popularity and the extant literature dealing with boxing, the sport continues to hold a certain mystique. Moreover, little is known of the boxer's experience of his/her world. In this chapter a number of components of the sport and factors that might influence a boxer's experience were discussed. While Wacquant's (1992) ethnographic research incorporates the odd direct quotation from boxers it fails to directly discuss their experiences of training or competition. Rather, Wacquant provides a rich description of the boxing environment from his own perspective. The goal of this research was to extend the work of Wacquant and others by obtaining the first-person experiences of professional boxers training for competition. It was anticipated that the results might provide insights for trainers and sport psychology consultants who work with boxers. If so, these individuals might be able to use the information to maximize the sporting experience of future fighters.

CHAPTER 3

Methods

This study was designed to examine boxers' experience of training for competition using a qualitative research approach. More specifically, phenomenological interviews were conducted with professional boxers to examine their experience of training in depth. This chapter consists of Two Parts. In Part One, a brief discussion of existential phenomenology is provided. In Part Two a description of the participants and the procedures of data collection and data is given.

Part One - Existential Phenomenology

In the past two decades a number of scholars have advocated the use of existential phenomenological methods in sport psychology research (e.g., Martens, 1987; Dale, 1996). Among other things these calls were motivated by the feeling that athletes desired "an opportunity to discuss their broader life concerns with someone other than their coach, parents or friends" (Nesti, 2004, p. 7) and that conventional quantitative research approaches were inadequate for this task. Although the number of in-depth qualitative investigations in sport psychology have increased significantly in recent years (e.g., Czech et al., 2004; Dale, 1994; 2000; Eklund, Gould, & Jackson, 1993; Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1992), those that have gleaned significant information about the subjective experiences of athletes are still relatively rare. In order for sport psychology consultants to improve their understanding of the athletes they are trying to help they must "abandon the belief that there is only one legitimate way of knowing in sport psychology and begin to understand that it is possible and desirable to examine behavior in different ways" (Dewar & Horn, 1992, p. 17).

Traditionally researchers and practitioners in sport psychology have sought to understand athletes from two different perspectives: (a) the athlete's observable physical behavior, and (b) the athlete's unobservable side, which includes the athlete's thoughts and emotions (Valle & Halling, 1989). The idea of an objective body and a subjective mind originated in Cartesian dualism (Valle, King, & Halling, 1989). According to this view, "the subjective was conceptualized as experienced solely by the individual having the experience and incapable of being quantified by observable measures, thereby, making it unavailable to rigorous study and evaluation via the traditional scientific method" (Dale, 1996, p. 308). Therefore, those interested in studying human experience needed to find a viable option; "hence, the development of existential phenomenology" (Dale, 1996, p. 309).

Existentialism. Existential phenomenology as its name suggests, "is a combination of two philosophies, one concerned with a certain perspective on human existence and the other with a certain mode of investigating that existence" (Pollio et al., 1997, p. 4). The philosophy of existentialism is concerned with who people are and how they may come to live an authentic life (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Jaspers, and Jean-Paul Sartre all contributed to the philosophy of existentialism and belief that human beings define themselves and their existence in the world (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Of central importance to existentialism is the phrase coined by Sartre: "existence precedes essence." Ultimately, humans must first exist before their life can have meaning but in the end they are the ones who define the meaning or give meaning to their existence.

Phenomenology. In their search for a systematic method of inquiry existentialists turned to phenomenology. A method originally developed by Edmund Husserl and later by Martin Heidegger, phenomenology is a rigorous scientific method that allows for the careful description of human phenomena (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). The method "focuses on the descriptions and meanings that a person provides in relation to an experience or situation" (Nesti, 2004, p. 21). This approach not only informs the researcher but also helps the participants to understand and bring meaning to situations they have experienced in their lives (Nesti, 2004). A key aspect of the phenomenological method is that the researcher is acutely aware that the expert on the phenomenon is the participant. For this reason, the participant is sometimes referred to as the co-participant, signifying that the research process is a collaborative effort between researcher and research participant.

Differences exist between phenomenology and other types of qualitative research, mainly due to its focus on personal experience and not descriptions (Polkinghorne, 1989). Rather than trying to provide descriptive accounts of actions and behaviors as is the case in other forms of qualitative research, phenomenology is "directed at trying to capture what a particular experience means to an individual" (Nesti, 2004, pp. 40-41). Since the limited previous research has failed to examine in-depth the perceptions and feelings of boxers, phenomenology was the ideal paradigm within which to conduct this research.

"As researchers in the field of sport psychology, we can learn a great deal about the experience of athletes if we allow them the opportunity to tell us via interviews where they are free to describe their experiences" (Dale, 1996, p. 309). Overall, phenomenological interviews are a more effective research method for "describing an athlete's experience than the

questionnaire or interview guide" (Dale, 1996, p. 314). For the purposes of this study, boxers were asked to describe their experiences of training for competition during in-depth phenomenological interviews.

Part Two - Procedures

The procedures in this study were based on Thomas and Pollios' (2002) recommendations for conducting existential phenomenological research. These include *Exploring Researcher Bias, Selection of Co-Participants, Data Collection, Data Analysis,* and *Developing/Confirming Thematic Structure.*

Exploring Researcher Bias

Polkinghorne (1989) states that, "phenomenological research emphasizes approaching the topic afresh without preconceived notions about what one will find in the investigation" (p. 47). Therefore, one of the first steps of phenomenological research is the exploration of researcher biases. Bracketing is a process by which the researcher is interviewed by an individual with qualitative research experience in order to determine the researcher's own expectations and perceptions regarding his/her chosen topic of research. This process is designed to help the researcher "put aside theories, knowledge, and assumptions about the phenomenon" (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 33). Bracketing also helps prevent the researcher from passing preconceptions and biases onto co-participants when conducting the interviews. It is, however, important to note that is impossible for a researcher to completely put aside biases and presuppositions (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Rather, s/he should attempt to temporarily suspend bracketed material while realizing the information has the potential to seep back into the research at any time (Thomas, 2000). Consequently, bracketing is not a one-time event but rather an on-going process

throughout the entire research project (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Continuing cycles of reflection, bracketing and intuiting on the part of the researcher (Ahern, 1999; Porter, 1998) are essential in order to allow the co-participants' words to accurately reflect their experiences.

Bracketing interview. For this study the primary researcher participated in a phenomenological bracketing interview in order to illuminate and bring recognition to his own perceptions and biases regarding boxers' experiences of training for competition. The primary researcher was initially asked why he was conducting the research and subsequent questions investigated a range of topics. These included, his opinion on boxing, his own experience of training and any biases he was bringing to the research process. The interview was conducted by an individual familiar with the interview process, audio recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Subsequent analysis of the bracketing interview revealed several potential biases. The researcher expressed a very positive perception of the sport and had a personal connection to boxing through a friend who is a professional boxer. On numerous occasions the researcher described what he believed to be the potential physical and mental skills needed to be a professional boxer. The researcher also expressed the desire and passion to help boxers as a sport psychology consultant by providing effective mental skills training. He also reflected upon his own experiences of training for competition as a college tennis player. Although he had no participation experience in combat sports he assumed that boxing training was more challenging than any he had ever personally experienced.

Lastly, the researcher reflected upon the co-participants and assumed they would differ from him in terms of race/ethnicity and socioeconomic/educational status. These assumptions stemmed from previous research which has consistently shown that the majority of professional

boxers are from minority racial groups (e.g., *Black, Latino*) and from lower socioeconomic/educational status groups. The primary researcher defined himself as *White*, middle-class and well educated due to his higher educational degrees. In actuality eight out of the nine co-participants defined themselves as *White* while socioeconomic class and educational status were never discussed. It is important to note that although these issues may well have been important to the co-participants in general discussion of such topics was not relevant to their experiences of training for competition.

From the bracketing interview the primary researcher realized he was bringing numerous biases and presuppositions to the research process. Although, this is unavoidable in phenomenology having evidence in terms of a bracketing transcript allowed the researcher to continually reflect upon these biases and presuppositions before each interview and during the data analysis. Ultimately, the primary researcher did not feel that these biases affected his interaction with his co-participants. Perhaps his knowledge of boxing and willingness to listen allowed for open and honest interviews. Lastly, the interpretative research group which had read the bracketing interview consistently discussed and challenged his findings during data analysis to help ensure reliability and validity.

Field notes. Immediately after conducting each interview field notes were taken. The notes described the physical setting, unusual events, verbal and non-verbal communication, and the researcher's reactions (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). The processes of bracketing and taking field notes help ensure researchers are "…more attuned to their presuppositions about the nature and meaning of the present phenomenon and thereby sensitize them to any potential demands they may impose on their participants either during the interview or in its subsequent interpretation"

(Pollio et al. 1997, p. 48). In the present study, field notes (see Appendix A) were recorded immediately following each interview.

Selection of Co-Participants

After obtaining approval of study from the University of Tennessee Institutional Review Board the researcher contacted boxing gyms within the Southeastern United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK) via email and phone calls to establish if they had any professional boxers training within their facilities. The emails included a description of the purposes, procedures and requirements of the co-participants. Contact was initially made with the owner of the gym and/or a trainer. The primary researcher contacted these gyms as part of a convenience sample; ultimately all participants came from gyms within the UK. Access to professional boxers within the Southeastern US proved exceptionally difficult with trainers and owners unwilling to returns phone calls and emails. The primary researcher was able to establish contact with trainers within the UK through a British university professor who had previously published articles on boxing and also through a personal friend who was a current professional boxer. Access to the co-participants was always made through their trainer. Some trainers invited the primary researcher to their gym while others provided phone numbers and emails of potential co-participants.

For the purposes of this study, three criteria were used for initial inclusion. Firstly, co-participants had to be of professional status and have a professional fight record. Secondly, they had to be currently active in their career (i.e., not retired). Lastly, they had to be English speaking. Additional inclusion criteria recommended by Thomas and Pollio (2002) were also used. Specifically, co-participants needed to have experienced the phenomenon and be willing to talk about that experience. Contact was made directly with the potential co-participants to

establish their interest and willingness to participate in the study. Upon meeting the criteria and volunteering to participate, each was scheduled for an interview and a time and place convenient for the co-participant. A detailed description of co-participants is provided in Chapter 4. The final number of co-participants was ultimately determined by the "saturation" of the data. The concept of saturation refers to the point when no new information or themes are being observed in the data (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Of the nine interviews, co-participants three and four were interviewed back-to-back while the other seven interviews were conducted individually. After each interview the data was transcribed and subjected to initial thematizing by the primary researcher. Between interviews seven and eight it was apparent that no new information or themes were appearing. Interview nine confirmed data saturation had been reached but due to the quality and richness of the quotes it was included in the final sample.

Data Collection

For the purposes of this study boxers were asked to respond to the following open-ended question: "When you think of your experience of training for competition, what stands out for you?" This opening question was "worded to allow for a broad range of descriptive responses from each participant" (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 32). Follow-up questions were used only to gain clarification and details to previous answers. The flow of the dialogue was set by the co-participant (Thomas & Pollio, 2002) and no attempt was made to lead the co-participant, although the researcher did attempt "to help focus the participant on unfolding themes and details" (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 26). Any changes to question wording were made to increase co-participant understanding. The researcher also framed questions in a manner that could "help subjects to report their experiences rather than to give worldly depictions"

(Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 46). At the conclusion of the interview co-participants were asked if they had anything to add regarding their experience, which helped ensure that the researcher had gained co-participants' full experience. Nothing of particular significance stemmed from this final question. The researcher also summarized the main points of the interview and asked for validation or corrections on any of the points. The interviews allowed "the person being interviewed (the athlete or performer) to be the expert as opposed to the researcher in more standardized modes of inquiry" (Dale, 1996, p. 310).

Pilot interview. A pilot interview was conducted with one male boxer, aged 21. The purposes of the interview were to determine whether the interview question was appropriate for examining the research topic and to refine the researcher's interviewing skills. The transcript of the pilot interview was also analyzed and, along with the help of the bracketing interview, enabled the researcher to determine that he had maintained an unbiased approach throughout the interview. The exercise provided the primary researcher with his first insight into the world of boxing from a participant's perspective. The pilot interviewee talked about the sport with a great deal of passion and was eager to share his experiences of training for competition.

Co-participant interviews. Co-participants were interviewed at a time and location convenient to them. The locations included the athletic training room within a boxing gym, a coffee shop, a bar and participants' homes. All interviews were conducted face-to-face by the primary researcher. Before conducting the interview each co-participant completed a form containing demographic information (Appendix B) and provided consent by reading and completing a consent form (Appendix C). The duration of the interviews ranged from 15 to 60 minutes in length. The precise length of each interview is included in Table 1. Despite the

disparity in length each co-participant spoke for as long as necessary to describe his experience in-depth. All interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder and all voice recordings were kept confidential until the interviews were transcribed. After that, the recordings were destroyed.

All information obtained was kept strictly confidential. Pseudonyms were used when presenting quotes to support the thematic structure in order to maintain the confidentiality of co-participants as well as other persons and places mentioned in the interviews. Exceptions to this procedure were made only when co-participants used the name of a well-established/famous boxer to illustrate a particular point or to provide context to certain stories.

Data Analysis

Interview transcription and validation. The interview data were analyzed in a number of ways. After each interview was transcribed verbatim by the primary researcher, the text was read "several times to obtain a sense of the whole" (Dale, 1996, p. 315). Seven co-participants were then invited to read their interview transcripts for "clarity and accuracy and make any necessary alterations" (Sparkes, 1998, p. 371). Five co-participants responded that they were satisfied with their transcripts, two did not reply to the initial or follow-up emails. Logistically, it was impossible to gain access to some co-participants after the initial interview as they lived in different countries and/or did not have email access. All five co-participants who read their transcripts stated the transcripts represented an accurate portrayal of their experience of training for a competition.

The interpretative research group. Three transcripts were read aloud by an interpretative research group at the University of Tennessee, with one member reading as the co-participant

and one as the researcher. Throughout the readings the group paused frequently to discuss the themes arising from the text. The discussions were facilitated by professors with expertise within the field of phenomenology although all group members were encouraged to voice opinions. Each group member was encouraged to write comments on the transcripts and these were returned to the primary researcher at the end of the session. This process allowed the primary researcher to efficiently compile notes from all group members. Each group member brought with them a diverse perspective from their respective forms of disciplinary training, gender role socialization, and cultural heritage (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). The same group had earlier read and interpreted the researcher's bracketing interview and was, therefore, able to highlight any assumptions or biases that appeared during the interviews with co-participants. Through the process of discussion, questioning and occasional disagreement the group helped the researcher analyze the transcripts while questioning and challenging his interpretations (Pollio et al. 1997). Ultimately, the primary researcher made the final decision with regards to thematizing as he was the individual who conducted the interviews and was privy to contextual information such as body language and the tone of the language used.

The research group helped maintain the rigor of the interpretative process by continuously questioning the assumptions made by the researcher and other group members (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Furthermore, the group helped take the burden of interpretation off the primary researcher and simultaneously prevented the data analysis process from becoming monotonous. Once the researcher became comfortable with the interpretative process he analyzed the remaining transcripts independently.

The entire analysis involved the development of a thematic structure. This included the identification of meaning units in the transcripts, connecting the "meaning units" to develop sub-themes and themes, and searching for metaphors to describe the themes. The thematic structure was developed and refined numerous times until a structure was agreed upon by the researcher and the interpretative group. The final thematic structure was presented in a diagram to figurally "depict[s] the themes and their relationships" (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 38) describing the boxers' experience of training for a competition.

Developing/Confirming Thematic Structure

The final step of the process was to obtain feedback from the co-participants to validate the findings and determine whether the thematic structure depicted their personal experience (Dale, 1996; Nesti, 2004). The same five co-participants who confirmed their transcripts were accurate were also presented with the final thematic structure and asked to provide feedback. All stated that the structure accurately reflected their experiences of training for competition. For example, one co-participant responded "Yeah mate that picture you sent is spot-on. I've never thought of training like that but all those bits fit together real well. Thanks mate that's real interesting" (Dan, personal communication, March 2, 2009).

To further establish the validity of this research, whenever possible the co-participants' own language was used in describing the dialogue and in wording the themes (Dale, 1996; Pollio et al. 1997). Using the co-participant's words helped keep the interpretation as close to the experience as possible (Dale, 1996). By using the co-participants' words the researcher attempted to convince readers that the interpretation was accurate; for "the degree of validity of

the findings of a phenomenological research project…depends on the power of its presentation to convince the reader that its findings are accurate" (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 57).

Issues of validity and reliability. The validity of phenomenological research is judged on both methodological and experiential criteria (Pollio et al., 1997). The methodological criteria refer to whether the methods used "…are rigorous and appropriate to the research topic; experiential issues concern whether findings are plausible and illuminating" (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 41). The term "plausibility" relates to whether the person reading the text can see the relationship between the researcher's interpretation and the data (Pollio et al., 1997). While "illumination" refers to whether the data allows "the reader to see the phenomena in a different light, to allow for a new understanding" (Pollio et al., 1997, p. 55), if the research idea is well-grounded and well-supported then one can have confidence in its validity (Polkinghorne, 1989).

Due to the qualitative nature of phenomenology no individuals ever report the exact same experience of a specific phenomenon. Therefore, unlike other forms of research, reliability in phenomenology is not achieved through the replication of results. Rather, a thematic structure that captures the essence of the phenomenon represents reliability. "Using a different group and collecting different examples is meant to broaden the themes that have emerged but not to change their essential thematic pattern as noted during the initial analysis" (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 40). Criteria for validity and reliability are achieved if the reader can find supporting evidence in the text for the researcher's interpretation and appreciate how the thematic structure is representative of the co-participants' experience (Pollio et al. 1997).

CHAPTER 4

Results

The primary purpose of this study was to explore boxers' experiences of training for competition. To achieve this goal, in-depth phenomenological interviews were conducted with nine professional boxers. In this chapter a description of the co-participants is provided followed by a presentation of the thematic structure that was developed from the interviews. In addition, to general themes and sub-themes, sample quotes are included to illustrate how what the co-participants said are reflected in the themes.

Co-Participants

The final sample of co-participants was comprised of nine male boxers, from different six gyms, with professional fight records who were currently active in their careers. The co-participants ranged in age from 22 to 42 years. The sample included former and current World, Commonwealth, European and British champions. A brief description of the co-participants along with the pseudonym used for each boxer is shown in Table 1.

Communicating and Perceiving

In order to capture co-participants' experience effectively, communication between the researcher and the co-participant had to be assured. One of Merleau-Ponty's central claims in *The Prose of the World* is that the use of language plays a central role in people's sharing of the world (Primozic, 2001). Thus, in the phenomenological interviews with these boxers it was keenly important that this sharing be *spoken*. "It is the spoken word that is alive and forceful. It delivers meanings unavailable in written communication" (Primozic, 2001, p. 69).

Table 1.

Descriptions of Co-Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Years as Professional	Career Record W – L – D	Interview Time in mins
Adam	36	White	14	41- 3 - 1	36:31
Ben	22	White	1	1 – 0 – 0	29:39
Chris	38	White	8	6 – 19 – 2	24:44
Dan	28	Black	3	9 – 0 – 0	45:37
Eddie	22	White	2	5 – 1 – 1	15:12
Frank	29	White	2	5 – 0 – 0	32:09
Greg	23	White	7	16 – 2 – 1	44:51
Harry	39	White	7	6 – 12 – 1	35:12
Ian	42	White	2	3 – 1 – 0	62:39
(*N* = 9)	(*M* = 31)		(*M* = 5.1)		(*M* = 36.08)

While communication is vital, it is the perception of the experience that is also important for phenomenologists. Merleau-Ponty stressed the importance of perception and "it is perception that opens us to reality, providing a direct experience of the events, objects and phenomena of the world" (Thomas, 2005, p. 69). Furthermore, reality is ultimately defined by the individual experiencing the phenomena. While the boxing experience placed a huge emphasis on the physical elements of participation, the present research process allowed co-participants to share their experiences and, hopefully, facilitated their connections to their world. As Pimozic (2001) stated, "just as our bodies enable and sustain our contact and interactions with the world of the things themselves, so too does the language enable and sustain our living in a world of public, shared, and lived truths" (p.69). It is through language that the researcher explored nine professional boxers' experiences of training for competition.

The Thematic Structure

Qualitative analysis of the transcripts revealed a total of 341 meaning units, which were further grouped into sub-themes and general themes. A meaning unit is simply a word or number of words that reflect a particular meaning different from other units. For example, "pride" was a meaning unit found in this research. The final thematic structure revealed six major dimensions that characterized these boxers' experiences of training for competition: *Achieving Potential, Preparing, Sacrificing, Finding Support, Fearing* and *Loving/Hating.* A visual depiction of the thematic structure and interactions between the various dimensions are shown in Figure 1.

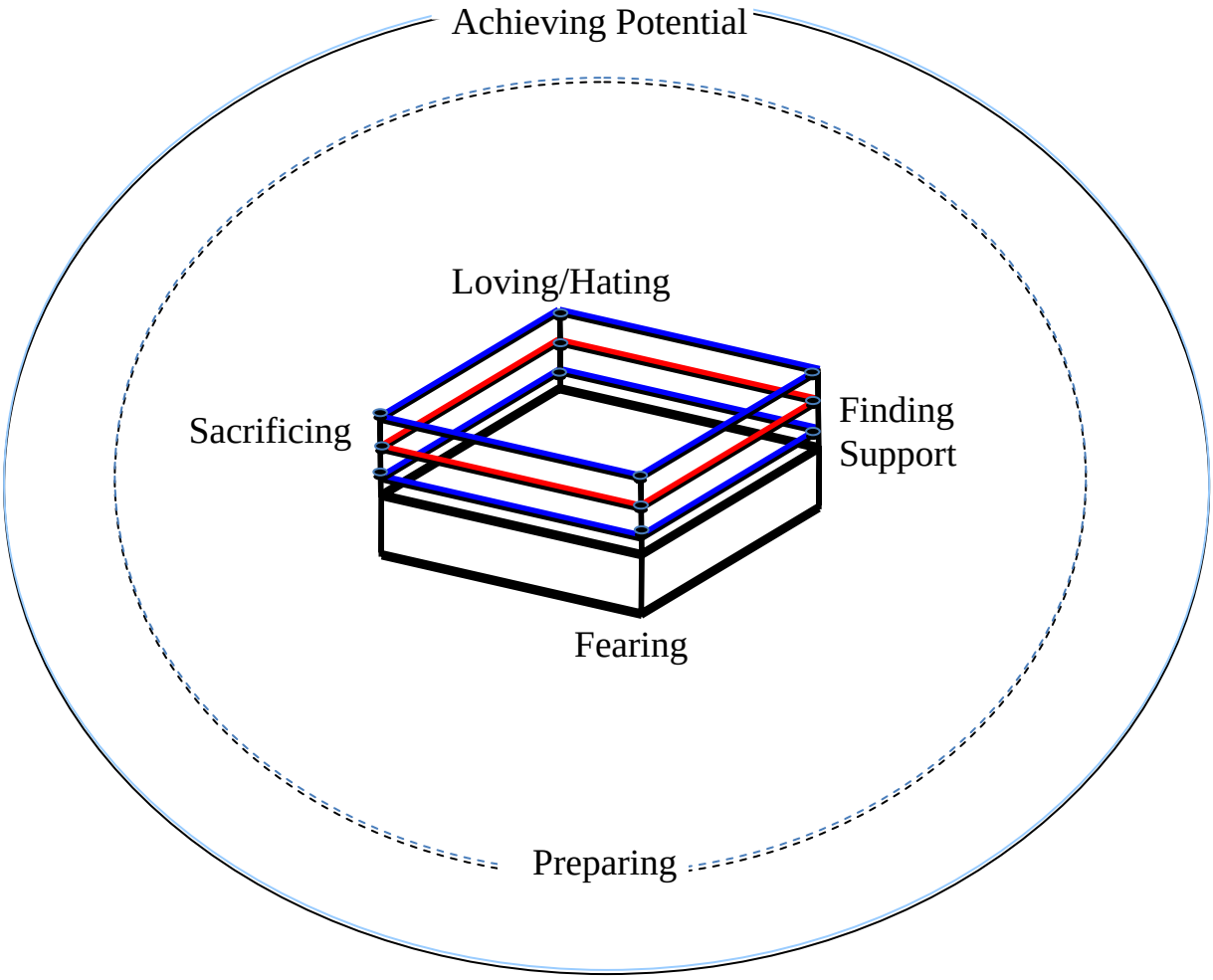

Figure 1. Diagram of Boxers' Experiences of Training for Competition

According to existential-phenomenologists, human existence emerges against one of the four major "grounds" of *World*, *Body*, *Time*, or *Others* (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). In other words, what becomes "figural" in a person's experience emerges against one or more of these grounds. It is also important to note that the "figure and ground co-create each other in human experience" (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 18). If something is figural it means that it stands out and is prominent to the individual experiencing the phenomena. In the present study, *Achieving Potential* was the most prominent theme to emerge and represented the primary ground against which boxers' experience of training for competition was situated. A second theme, *Preparing*, also emerged as a secondary ground that encompassed the figural themes of *Sacrificing, Finding Support, Fearing,* and *Loving/Hating*. Put simply, the four figural themes in this research co-existed against the background of *Preparing* and the deeper ground of *Achieving Potential*.

It is important to note that *Achieving Potential* is worded in the present progressive tense. The experience of training for these boxers is an ongoing process that prepares them for future achievements. They prepare for this future by sacrificing, facing their fears, and finding support while simultaneously loving and hating the whole experience. Although these themes are presented as separate entities it is important for the reader to keep in mind that all of the themes are interrelated within these boxers' experience and cannot be understood in isolation. In the following sections, each of the major themes is discussed. As the spoken word is of central importance in phenomenology, representative quotes are used to illustrate each theme. Pseudonyms are provided after each quote to indicate which co-participant made that statement.

Sacrificing

Sacrificing emerged as one of the major themes of boxers' experience of training for competition. This theme encompassed boxers' descriptions of the sacrifices they made while training for competition and included four dimensions: *Family Time, Social Time* with *Friends, Habits,* and *Money.*

Family time. These boxers indicated that one of the key sacrifices they had to make while training for competition was time spent with their families. Family members included wives, girlfriends, children and siblings. The co-participants expressed disappointment and negativity towards the lost time with loved ones while simultaneously recognizing that this was a sacrifice that was required in order to train effectively. As one boxer who has to travel long distances to the gym put it:

> For me personally I have two kids at home which - I can go weeks without really seeing because by the time I leave in the morning they are not out of bed and by the time I get back they have been to school and gone back to bed themselves. So you are missing out on all that as well. But boxing is one of them things – if you don't love it 120% you couldn't do it, because there's not many advantages to being a boxer. You get hit in the face (laughs) – you don't get paid much – and it is hard work and you don't get to see your family. So sometimes the idea is "What am I doing all this for?" But it is one of those things… if you don't love boxing you won't do it, because like I said, there's not many perks of the job. (Dan)

While time spent away from the family was deemed necessary for training purposes several boxers indicated that doing so could have a negative affect upon performance. One said:

> I love my family. I've got a big family and being away for that four weeks [training in America] were probably the worst four weeks I've ever had in boxing and that were a sacrifice – terrible…terrible. But that's one thing I had to do. That's why I'm trying to regain my World title because I put a lot down to my performance that night were the fact that I was homesick. I was that homesick--it was unbelievable. (Adam)

Time away from his children evoked especially uncomfortable emotion from this boxer who also stated, "I spend so much time with them, the kids, it just felt funny being away from them for so long" (Adam).

Social time with friends. Some of these boxers also mentioned sacrificing social time with their friends. As one put it:

> You know, when your phone rings and your mates are at somebody's birthday party or something – of course I want to go but I'm fighting in four or five weeks time, so you're not allowed to go. Your brother's birthday party or someone's getting married, you're missing them. (Dan)

Another boxer who was a former world champion recognized that although boxing had rewarded him with materialistic things and the opportunity for world travel it also deprived him of social time with his friends:

> I used to be out every weekend and I used to have some great times and I used to have some right laughs with my mates and I think that is one thing I have sacrificed. Not going out with me mates and having a good laugh. I know now boxing has probably given me…I have done more things through boxing than I ever would have - been all round the world and have a nice house, but I have sacrificed going out with me mates and

> sometimes money isn't everything, and I know for a fact that I have sacrificed some good nights out. (Adam)

Another boxer who was the youngest co-participant reflected upon the absence of a social life and concluded, "Yeah, just tend to stay-in really. It's a pretty boring life being a boxer" (Eddie). For Adam sacrificing time with friends during a normally festive period was also difficult. He stated:

> The biggest sacrifices are obviously not going out with your mates – this year, not going out at Christmas. If I hadn't had this fight I would have been out, I would have been out last night, I would have been out today, and those are the biggest sacrifices.

Habits. All of these boxers seemed to crave a *normal* life containing the usual comfortable vices. However, they recognized that sacrificing routine habits was necessary for them to have a chance to achieve their fighting potential. This did not mean these life choices were easy, however. Social habits such as drinking and smoking are not choices afforded to these boxers during training for competition. Practicing abstinence from drinking also set the co-participants apart from others they encountered in social situations. As one co-participant put it:

> I liked a drink but now I'm near the end I don't drink. So that's another thing – it does alienate you from other people, you go out and people are blind-drunk and you think "I don't wanta be here" or "I'll have one drink or two drinks" but it can soon…yeah, you're missing out on things like that but it depends what you want. (Chris)

Most of these habits revolved around social time with friends:

> Yeah, yeah, it were difficult at that time when I were in me 20's - sometimes you wanted to go out with the lads - have a drink, but you had a fight coming up next week so you just can't do it. So yeah, that's a hard part yeah, that's a hard part. (Chris)

For others seasonal holidays made these types of sacrifices particularly difficult:

> I have gone out sometimes but when you don't drink it is hard to get involved and have a laugh, and I think that is probably the biggest sacrifice – like it is Christmas now and I am going to try and enjoy it and I have two little kids, two little babies now and probably that is the most enjoyable thing about Christmas. People keep saying "It's Christmas now – are you going out over Christmas?" But I'm in training now, I've got two little ones - I can't go out over Christmas. That is sacrifices in boxing. (Adam)

Alcohol in particular seemed to be a constant sacrifice for these co-participants, but it was one they were prepared to make. One boxer stated, "Alcohol – everyone likes a night out but I don't touch a drop while I'm training, I hardly drink any alcohol" (Dan). However, the knowledge that they had sacrificed sometimes had a psychological affect upon the boxers. As one put it:

> I can easily go for a night out but it comes back to the mental side – I can go for a night out--probably have five or six pints – not get drunk and think "oh that's alright, I'm not fighting for another four weeks." But then in four weeks time that will be playing on my mind - "I shouldn't have done that, I shouldn't have gone out." So you're not in the right mental state to go into a fight because you know you've cheated yourself. Nobody would know I'd been out but *I'd* know and there's only *me* in that ring…so you can fool other people but you can never fool yourself. It's always me and I'd know in the back of my mind that I'd not prepared properly and that's when you're in for a fall. (Dan)

Another boxer with a good record alluded to the unwritten rule within boxing regarding abstinence from drinking:

> I never used to drink either, 'cause you're not supposed to but I never drunk when I were younger. But around 19, 20, I started drinking a bit and putting on weight. But If I'm gonna take it seriously I've gotta stop doing those things, I've gotta watch me weight. I wanta be the best so that's why I'm stopping those things. (Greg)

In summary, sacrificing habits such as drinking were deemed difficult, yet necessary and were accepted by the boxers in order to achieve their fighting potential.

Money. As with any career, money plays a central role in professional boxing. How these boxers reflected on money issues varied slightly as they were all in different stages of their careers. For example, one of the older boxers had quite a negative (but perhaps realistic) perspective on the earning potential of the profession:

> It's probably the worst sport to be involved in because there is no money in it. You talk to [Phil] about it. People think when you turn pro, they think when you win, say, five fights you are earning big, massive money but there is not much money in boxing at all, unless you get to what people see on TV. They see the top end of boxing usually on Sky Sports – but you are not making these hundreds of thousands unless you are at world level - well, World Champion. There is not massive money in boxing. (Adam)

Interestingly, Adam was a former world champion who later commented:

> I've done all right, but there is a very, very low ratio of boxers who have made money, because one thing you need, one major thing you need when you first start boxing is a good sponsor and sponsors don't like throwing money at boxers. They don't like having

> their name on your shorts or tops because if you get knocked out on TV they don't like to see their name on a knocked out boxer. So it is very difficult to get sponsorship--*very* difficult.

Despite these financial difficulties a younger boxer talked about how he hoped to earn enough to enjoy a comfortable retirement:

> I wanta have plenty of money, I wanta do what I want, when I want. So if I work hard now for the next ten years then I dare say I can retire and settle down – that's it. I can go out drinking and partying and things then. I can do all that stuff – eat what I want then.
>
> (Eddie)

For boxers just embarking on their career like Eddie the difficult reality of a professional career included spending the limited money they had as well as earning it:

> Well until you make it big, the money - it's hard to pay for your gym fees, your expenses, your medical each year. If you haven't got a sponsor to pay for your medical, your license and things like that it's tough.

One boxer mentioned sacrificing earning potential from another type of job in order to train for boxing. "Yeah, like I say I've sacrificed, I've turned down jobs that have clashed with me boxing" (Ben). That these boxers reflected differently upon financial issues may have been due to the fact that were they at different stages of their careers (i.e., earning potential based on record) and their lives. Some had to financially provide for wives and children, whereas others simply had to provide for themselves. Some had sponsors whereas others struggled without a sponsor. Some were nearing the end of their careers and could perhaps reflect more realistically on the potential for earning money in the sport whereas others were just beginning their careers

and perhaps overestimated their own earning potential. Irrespective of these issues dealing with insufficient money seemed to be an integral part of the sacrifices these boxers were prepared to make in training for competition.

In summary, the sacrifices necessary for the boxers in this study may have elicited a variety of unenthusiastic comments yet were also accepted and even embraced at times. For example, Ben who had only had one professional fight stated:

> I know I'm not a World champion but it's just something I enjoy doing. I don't drink or smoke, it's my pastime, it's my hobby, it's something I enjoy doing. So that's why I've turned down jobs in the past that have clashed with it, even as an amateur I did, so yeah I've made a lot of sacrifices.

In response to a follow-up question, Ben was quick to reply, "No it doesn't bother me, 'cause at the end of the day you only get one shot and I've got the rest of my life to get jobs and do other things in life." When asked about the possibility of a short career, Ben replied "Yeah, yeah, but at least I can say that I've sacrificed and I've done it. I've give it me all and I have no regrets." Despite the inherent difficulties involved in sacrificing for their careers, overall, these boxers found comfort in the notion that the sacrifices were things they had to endure in order to reach their own potential (*Achieving Potential*).

Finding Support

While the boxers in this study sacrificed many things in order to train, they simultaneously received support from others when training for competition. This support came from three different types of people: *Gym Partners, Trainers,* and *Family/Friends.*

Gym Partners. Although boxing is very much an individual sport during competition the process of training is often a group effort. Few boxers can afford their own gym nor do they wish to train completely alone. Moreover, certain aspects of boxing training demand that athletes work with others (e.g., sparring). Therefore, it is hardly surprising that *Gym Partners* played an integral role in these boxers' experiences of training for competition. This form of support was emphasized by Dan who stated, "It's mad in boxing 'cause you're in there on your own when the bell rings, you're on your own, but you've got people who've helped you all through training camp." Fellow boxers seemed to provide four types of support for the co-participants: (a) *Advice,* (b) *Bonding,* (c) *Fun and humor,* and (d) *Rivalry and competition.*

Advice. One of the younger boxers talked specifically about how boxers cooperate with each other during sparring sessions in order to learn certain elements:

> So it's just better and you learn more, it's a slower pace, so if you're sparring a kid…I don't know…who is a lot heavier or something or has more experience, you know he ain't going to take liberties. He's not going to get in and kill you 'cause he ain't going to learn anything from it either. So you just learn off each other…like all the tricks, the pro tricks and everything like that…I don't know it's just different – different sparring, slower pace and you learn more off it. (Ben)

Several boxers recognized that the value of training with others included learning something new. Even though Chris was one of the oldest and least successful boxers interviewed he stated:

> Just by thinking to myself "I'm learning something new" I try and learn something new every day from a different sparring partner or just sparring with different guys you learn different things.

The younger boxers looked to the more experienced professionals for advice. One stated, “Yeah everyone talks, you talk about fights, amateur fights you’ve had, they’ll [experienced fighters] help you in your sparring if you need it with whatever” (Ben). The opportunity to speak and spar with more experienced boxers also helped to develop this boxer’s confidence:

> Umm, I don’t know, just being around all the pro’s, they breed confidence ‘cause they’ve been about a bit and if you’re sparring the best then you feel the best. When you’re mingling with them and talking to them it helps. (Ben)

Another boxer mentioned how gym partners helped each other out in a variety of ways:

> So the only thing you really do on your own is the running. You run on your own in the morning and the rest of the time you’ve got a bit of a team around you – sparring partners and people like that. Like I said I think there’s 11 pros in our gym and we all help each other out when we’ve got a fight coming up. (Dan)

Frank emphasized the notion of receiving and providing support.

> Yeah definitely, yeah definitely because I give it to the other lads as well. Well I like to think…I try to. You know, we see each other every day and I see them more than I see my family (laughs) - the lads in the gym, you’re basically living with them. It’s just talking and it’s not always about boxing it can be about anything, you know? “I’ve trouble with this, or what do you think about this?” You’ll sit down and have a talk about it, have a laugh…it’s good.

Bonding. Based on the experience of these co-participants it appeared that gym partners did more than just give each other advice; they also provided a social group for the boxers where they could discuss topics other than boxing. As one put it, “It’s a bond and a band-of-brothers”

(Ian). These types of social interactions occasionally lead to the development of friendships. "It's good camaraderie sort of thing with everyone and everyone cares. Nobody wants to see any of the other lads lose" (Frank). These types of social interactions serve to help fighters develop their boxing skills while simultaneously making the experience of training more enjoyable. One boxer commented:

> What's really good about the boxing gym - when they come in the gym everybody's one. Even the most experienced fighter like [Paul] who's a world champion – he's got time for the young lad who's just come in off street, to point and direct him in the right ways – boxing skills. (Harry)

The bonding nature of friendships boxers develop in the gym has not been addressed much in previous research. Yet, the support these boxers received from gym partners appeared to be special. As one co-participant put it, "It's a friendship that's going to stand the test of time and there's a lot of fighters that actually have the same kind of friendship that have boxed and sparred each other. It's an earned friendship and an earned respect" (Ian). Irrespective of where boxers were in their careers they seemed willing to form friendships with other fighters while having a mutual respect for each other due to their participation in the sport.

> Well, I don't know, it's everything really. Everyone is at different stages in their career in there [John] is fighting for a European title, he's boxed [Greg Young] fought in America and all the rest of it. And then you've got other lads who've had a fight and lost, only had one fight and lost – you all mix in. You never really look at each other and think "he's done this or he's done this" you all just take the mick [ridicule/ poke fun] out of each other and that sort of thing. (Frank)

For an outsider it may be difficult to comprehend how people can hit each other and cause injury to each other and still remain friends. One boxer's comment put such friendships in perspective:

> Boxing – it's weird really. If you're sparring with someone or you've fought someone…once you've smacked someone in the mouth and they've hit you in the mouth, you get a bit of a bond, it's a strange feeling really. I know the kid I've fought has had to go through the same thing I have – all the training and everything. So you've instantly got that respect for them. It's like a "band of brothers" is boxing 'cause there's not many of us about…we're a crazy bunch of people really. (Dan)

Fun and humor. Due to the intensity and difficulty of training, humor and fun are another way gym partners provide support for each other. Boxers use humor to lighten the mood and to make the process of training more enjoyable. Adam who was the most experienced and successful professional stated:

> It's important to have some good guys at the gym who I can have a laugh with. Sometimes I go in there to have a joke or laugh with the kids to start feeling good about yourself, sometimes it's just about feeling good about yourself, my last training camp – sometimes I were training in the gym on my own and you can't have a laugh and it got a bit stale and that's one big reason why I felt as though…I felt I didn't have no good days but I weren't having a laugh. If you're not happy in the gym…then that affects performance. I go in here sometimes and have a right laugh with some of the lads.

While it could be presumed that fun and humor have no place in an environment where serious injury is a distinct possibility, these boxers suggested that having fun with training partners could

actually have a positive affect upon their training performance. One boxer, who was an experienced professional, made training fun by allowing younger boxers to try and hit him:

> Like tonight I'll probably get in the ring tonight with all the young ones and them throw shots at me head and they will try and knock me head-off but I'll have a laugh with them, have a joke and come home happy. Instead of training in a gym on my own, finishing training and thinking, "Oh,God, I've gotta do that again tomorrow." Sometimes if you're happy in your training then it makes you feel good. (Adam)

The use of humor and fun also interestingly seemed to play a role in developing the mental strength of these individuals, which previous research has failed to discuss. One said, "If you come to the gym and you can't take-a-laugh then there's no point coming 'cause everyone has to take a laugh. You can't give it if you can't take it" (Greg). It appeared that having fun was one way these boxers dealt with the intensity of training for competition.

Rivalry and competition. Although the training environment may have encouraged fun and friendships, due to the physical nature of the sport, rivalries and competition were also a form of support these boxers received from gym partners. Several stated that these rivalries motivated them to work harder:

> I know for a fact these younger fighters have got something to prove, they want to beat me they want to spar with me, they want to out-jab me, I can see it in their faces. It actually makes me want to train harder 'cause I still want to beat them, I still want to be the best. If we're doing circuits I want to do more press-ups than them, I want to do more sit-ups than them and I will get that. I will beat them like…like tonight I'll have five or six amateurs in the ring with me and they'll try and throw shots at me, they won't catch

> me, they might catch me two or three times but I'll tap them back just to let them know I'm still there like. But that's why I enjoy it, I like all the young ones having a go at me and I've got something to prove to them. I want to be the best in the gym. (Adam)

Rivalries often occurred when two fighters were matched similarly in size and ability:

> Yeah, like today I saw Eddie in the gym today training and I just wanted to train harder than him. I don't know, I just wanta be better than him. Like when we spar – he's always in the gym and I haven't been in the gym for the last two months but when we spar it's just a war 'cause we hit each other. We get shouted at all the time, we're banging each other and we shouldn't be really, we should be tapping each other. It's just a war because it's so competitive with each other and we just wanta be the best. There's like half the gym saying I'm better and the other half saying he's better. It's just things like that. (Greg)

Although the previous quote sounds like rivalries can be intense and ultra-competitive, Greg qualified his relationship with Eddie in response to a follow-up question:

> That competitive element can still be there and you can still be friends and everything. Even if you fight as professionals for a title, even a regional title, I know we can be friends after that. I don't bear grudges – if he beats me, he's beaten me "fair and square." I'm not going to be nasty about it…I'll just wanta fight him again and just have that chance to try and beat him again.

Pride also seemed to play a role within the sparring sessions and fueled the competitive nature of training:

> Ummm, the rivalry, there was great rivalry in the sparring sessions because the sparring partners like me had ambitions, so it was a chance to impress the promoters, the management of the fighters you were a sparring partner for. There was no hostile, bitter rivalry but there was great rivalry at the sparring sessions. You didn't want to be just overawed or cannon fodder, so some of the sparring sessions were very, very intense just because of the rivalry. (Ian)

Trainers. Like most professional athletes, boxers require a trainer to provide technical and tactical advice as well as emotional support during their careers. The word *trainer* is used instead of *coach* as this is the term used by all the co-participants although either term appears synonymous with the individual who guides and instructs an athlete through his/her career. Some boxers talked about the value and precision of their trainer's technical instruction. For example, one said, "We've done hours and hours training and sometimes it might takes hours to just get one thing right – with the jab, or for a whole single week you might just work on one single punch" (Dan). This boxer also talked about the countless hours he spent with his trainer:

> He [the trainer] puts a lot of hours in as well, so it's very rewarding for both of us when we get a good win. It feels good 'cause every time I'm in the gym he's in the gym. The only thing he doesn't do with me is run in the morning. Every other time I'm in the gym, he's in the gym. He's an ex-boxer himself so he knows what they have to go through so it's good to have someone training you who knows what it's like to get smacked in the mouth or a broken nose or a cut eye, things like that, he's been there and seen it and done it. (Dan)

Dan really appreciated the time put in by his trainer. The fact that the trainer had the personal experience of being a professional boxer was also of comfort to Dan. Although boxing is an individual sport Dan saw winning as a team effort, "…when *we* [italics added] get a good win" (Dan). Another stated that knowledge regarding the intensity of the training was important: "Your trainer has got to know when to tell you to work hard, he's gotta know when to start picking training up" (Ben). Another stated that it was important to have a whole team around him: "It's good having the lads in the gym, [Jeremy - trainer] and everyone, and a good team around you to support you – even though you are on your own at the end of the day" (Frank). Spending so much time together made the relationship between this boxer and his trainer a vital one:

> I think the most important relationship is between trainer and fighter because you spend probably 12 hours a day with each other. So first and foremost you've got to respect each other and I think it helps if you get on with them. I get on well with John which is a bonus. So you've got to respect each other and you've got to respect what your trainer is telling ya. Like I said it's a dangerous sport and you've basically got your health in someone else's hands. He's got to be knowledgeable and you've got to know how to feed off each other. But every fighter is different – some like a bollocking [severe reprimand] in the corner, some like to be told how great they are - you know what I mean? So I think it's [boxer and trainer] the most important relationship, basically just for the amount of time you spend with each other. (Dan)

Issues of respect, trust, knowledge, and motivation all played a role in the trainer-athlete relationship. Due to the inherent dangers of the sport it was important for these boxers to know that their trainer had their best interests at heart. One co-participant stated:

> I [injured myself] in February and I got me first loss, which wasn't a loss – I was winning the fight but [I got injured]. I was unable to continue…well I continued for about 30 seconds with [the injury] but [Bill – trainer] pulled me out 'cause he were obviously thinking about me welfare. (Eddie)

Trainers earned the respect of these boxers by showing respect for the general welfare of opponents as well:

> Oh definitely, there's no one…well not that I've ever experienced…I've only ever trained with [Chris] but you can just tell you know. He's always – he gives his best, wants you to do your best, has good advice for you. You can see it whenever any of the lads are knocked out…he cares about other people – I've stopped a few of my opponents, [Chris] jumps…as soon as the fight is finished or the ref stops it or whatever. He jumps in, ignores me and is straight over to them 'cause you can see how much he cares. So…and it's the same as other fighters when lads have been knocked out in the gym before they've hit the ground [Chris] is there laid next to them, making sure they're alright so…you know, it's someone good to have behind you. (Frank)

Trainers need to be able to motivate their boxers in order to perform well. Having a trainer know how he'd react in certain situations was vital these to boxers. As one put it,

> I'm one of them, I like to 'er…I don't react well to pampering. I like a bit of a rocket up my arse every now and again - it gets me going. I fight with fire, a bit of…they say it's

> wrong to fight on anger but I like to fight with a bit of anger and it seems to work well for me and [John - trainer] knows sometimes what certain buttons to press to piss me off and that makes me want to fight. That's how I work, but other people are different and have to be told how great they are and for some that works for them. I know I'm not great so I think, "He's lying to me." (Dan)

The role of the trainer in boxing is multifaceted; not only are they expected to provide technical and tactical instructions and to motivate their athletes, they are also protective of boxers' general well-being. One co-participant expressed it this way:

> You've got [Bill - trainer] behind you and he's been there and done it. He's a very positive person to have around you, you know 'cause he's been and seen it all and he wants the best for you. At the end of the day if you look good and win then it's going to look good on him as well so he's not going to want anyone to go out there and lose or anything like that. (Frank)

In summary, all the co-participants in this study saw the trainer-boxer relationship to be a vital one. Although they emphasized the individualistic nature of competition in the ring these boxers also appreciated the team effort required for success. Due to the demanding nature of training for competition, it was important to these boxers to know that their trainer appreciated and understood their dedication to the sport. They felt that technical and tactical instruction was important but emphasized the intangible emotional support they received from their trainers as even more important. Having someone that cared about their health was particularly comforting and reassuring to these boxers.

Family/friends. Lastly, these boxers spoke of the support they received from family and friends. As previously mentioned, boxers are required to sacrifice time spent with family and friends in order to train and compete at the professional level; yet, ironically they also need support from the very people they cannot spend time with. As one co-participant put it:

> It is difficult, like I said but the mrs. and the kids they know what I do and they fully support it, if you know what I mean. It [boxing] would be hard to do if they were always saying "Daddy where are you?" or the mrs. was saying, "Oh, are you training again?" …or whatever, but they support me, so that helps. If you didn't have a balanced home life it would be hard to go through it all, because, like I say, your body is in agony and the last thing you want when you get home is your mrs. in your ear, "Where have you been all day?" So it is nice to get home and your mrs. has made you a nice cup of coffee or whatever…strokes your back and tells you it is going to be all right. So, if you didn't have that home life it would definitely be difficult. (Dan)

The level of understanding expressed by his family helped this boxer deal with the time he spent away from them. Although not related specifically to training, some co-participants expressed appreciation for the support of family during competition. One said:

> Yeah, yeah, I can hear them and everything. Especially me Dad, I hear me Dad all the time. I'll be sat in the corner and me Dad will rush to come to the other side of the ring just to look at me face and will keep shouting until I look to him. He'll be like "Come-on (name)" and I'll be like, "Yeah I'm gonna do it" and you know, it will just push me on. You know what I mean? It will push me on; give me more of a buzz and energy. So I need to win. It's all I think about during the fight – I need to win! (Greg)

For one boxer, the notion of "support" extended to the crowds at his fights. He stated, "Oh yeah, I had great support from all over the world when I boxed – win, lose or draw; I was always value for the money (Ian)." Overall, *Finding Support* was a key theme in boxers' experiences of training for competition. Without these different forms of support training for professional boxing would seem at the very least difficult, if not, impossible.

Fearing

Due to the traditionally masculine ethos that surrounds boxing it came as a surprise that these co-participants openly talked about their fears. They talked candidly about the various fears they experience; yet, none mentioned backing away or succumbing to these fears. Fearing seemed to be due to two major sources: (a) Letting Self and/or Others Down; and (b) Losing.

Letting self and/or others down. This sub-theme seemed to be particularly connected to the ground of *Achieving Potential.* One boxer talked about how fear constantly drove his training:

> Well, at the end of the day, at 5 o'clock in the morning when my alarm rings and me trainer's not there to get me out of bed at 5 o'clock, and it's the middle of winter now. You have two options-either get out of bed put your running stuff on and go for a run or you can press the snooze button and cuddle back up to the mrs. if you know what I mean. If you do cuddle up to the mrs. and have a bit of "hanky-panky" in the morning in the 10th, 11th, 12th round that might come back to haunt you, you know what I mean? So that's cutting a corner, if your trainer tells you to go have six rounds on that bag and you do five you're knackered [very tired] and you think "Oh I've done five that's alright." Or he says skip for three rounds and you only skip for two – just little things like that. They might be minute, little things…but in a long hard fight they all creep up on you and like I

> said I train hard out of fear but fear of running out of steam in the ring. Fear of getting to the 11th round and "God, I've got nothing left" and the other guy might have trained harder and things like that. (Dan)

These boxers also mentioned the fear of letting oneself down and not achieving one's potential. As one put it, "For me personally I train hard as hard as I do through fear because I don't want to get into the ring thinking I have not done enough" (Eddie). For some co-participants the fear of underpreparing coincided with the notion of not letting others down:

> At the end of the day you can die in boxing. It's the only game where you can legally kill somebody and not end up in court. It's part and parcel of the job so you've got to make sure…like I said I've got a mrs. and kids so it wouldn't be fair on them for me not to do this right. (Dan)

It is logical to assume that due to the physicality of the sport serious injury would be something these boxers feared. Surprisingly, this did not seem to be the case. They did, however, fear not being prepared. As Dan put it:

> And that's [fear] what forces me on. I don't know whether other boxers will admit to it but fear is one of the biggest things that drives me on to train hard. Not fear of getting hit or getting hurt 'cause that's part-and-parcel of the job, but the fear of not being prepared.

Fear drove these boxers to prepare to the best of their ability:

> I'll never forget my first trainer, who I had – [Clay] who told me there is going to be a point during a fight when you are going to think, "What the fuck am I doing in here?" …and you have got to have all the answers, know what I mean? (Dan)

Letting people down, whether is was themselves, their families, or even spectators at their fights represented a pervasive fear for these boxers. One co-participant summed it up this way:

> That's what I'm saying…especially if you're boxing in your own town and you've brought loads of fans. Like when I fought even as an amateur I'd sell maybe 100 tickets. Everyone would be shouting your name and I'd just be so scared that I'd let them down. I just wanta win anyway. I don't wanta let myself down and it would be even worse if I let me fans and family down. (Greg)

Their fear of letting others down was in part due to these boxers' appreciation of the support shown to them by others. This has not been shown in previous research and could have applied implications for sport psychology consultants.

> Ummm…the fear of letting everybody down. The fear of letting my trainer down, the fear of letting my family down, you know, just the fear of disappointing people. Because I knew, I knew, I had a great pain tolerance and I knew I could withstand a lot of pain. I knew in this particular fight I had the beatings of this guy but it was just a fear of letting everybody down, not performing well, embarrassing myself, umm different thing – you just don't want to disappoint. (Ian)

Losing. A professional boxer's career can change direction on the basis of a single fight. Therefore, it was not surprising that these boxers expressed a fear of *Losing*. It is important to note that although losing was a fear that was very real for some of the co-participants, others accepted losing as part of the sport. The career records of the various co-participants likely influenced the perspectives of these fighters. Some had never been defeated (i.e., Ben, Dan, and Frank) and some were fighting at the higher echelons of the sport where the difference between

victory and defeat could have major financial implications. The latter point was emphasized by one co-participant who stated, “It was probably on the biggest day of my life because I’d defended it [world title] four times and me next fight would have been a unification clash with Joe Smith but the fight well…it lost me millions literally” (Adam). Some co-participants, who could be described as “journeymen,” had experienced defeat many times (i.e., Harry and Chris). Therefore, they seemed to have less fear of losing. As one stated, “I haven’t won a lot of fights but that doesn’t matter” (Chris). Thus, it appeared that a number of factors mediated these boxers’ views on winning and losing.

One boxer emphasized that he’d rather die than lose to a certain opponent. He said, “But fighting and that, it’s just the worst - you don’t wanta lose a fight ever. And if I box against Eddie, then I don’t think I’d wanta lose that. I’d fight ‘til death with him” (Greg). Interestingly, this boxer also indicated that his fear of losing had increased the further he had progressed in his career. “Like my first fight I weren’t scared at all but as my fights have gone I’ve got more scared ‘cause I know the kids are better and they can knock people out.” However, he went on to point out that fear of injury was not the issue. “No I’m not scared of getting injured, I’m not scared of getting knocked-out, I don’t know what it is – I just don’t wanta lose” (Greg).

A few boxers talked about fears that did not seem to fall under either of the sub-themes. For example, Chris who had suffered 19 defeats in this career talked about trying to overcome the fear of physical punishment:

> Hard physically, yeah hard physically, going home with a few headaches and a few bumps and bruises. Aching and yeah it were hard physically, very hard physically. But you just keep doing it, it’s like anything, to get good at anything it’s practice, practice,

> practice. That's the thing if you can get back in there, if you can overcome your fear of getting in the ring.

Frank who was still undefeated in his professional career mentioned that he'd struggled with some fear before his first fight that affected his confidence and nerves. So he sought the help of a sport psychologist:

> When I sat down with this sport psychologist she said "you've gotta have this positive, mental attitude, you've gotta see yourself…see the future and look at yourself, think what's going to happen and see it in your mind…you winning" and all the rest of it. I have done and it's all come true so far so. (Frank)

Others talked of the fear of competing. One stated, "The doctor says to me 'Are you nervous?' I thought to me self, 'Stevie Wonder could see I was nervous' - I was terrified" (Ian).

In summary, all of these boxers acknowledged their fears. Some accepted them as part of their sport whereas others struggled with them. Some sought help to conquer them. Ian believed that the ways boxers handle their fears and emotions determined the boxer's potential for success:

> All fighters go through those emotions. If you interview fighters Duncan all over the world they all go through the same emotions. And that's what separates the champions from the contenders…because some of these contenders are every bit as good as the champions, but they just can't handle the occasion as well as some of the champions.

Loving/Hating

Another major theme that emerged from the interviews was the dynamic relationship of *Loving* and *Hating.* These boxers continually expressed the emotions of love and hate as they

described their experiences of training for competition. While they hated the difficulty of training at times, they all expressed the importance of loving the sport in order to endure the rigors of training.

Loving. Almost all the co-participants talked about being "in love" with their sport, including their training. "Yeah yeah, I enjoy training – all the time. You know every time I've got a chance I'm in the gym, I love training all the time" (Ben). The training itself generated euphoric emotions from some of the boxers: "It's just the buzz about it all that motivates me; I love training and the gym and all that." (Ben). The following boxer characterized his emotions with drug-like connotations:

> Yeah that buzz and that feeling and the training - it's all worth it in the end even if it's for a few hours before you go to bed and you get up in the morning and it's another day's training. (Frank)

A number of the co-participants used addictive or drug-orientated language in describing their love of training. As one stated, "Yeah yeah, I enjoy coming to the gym and that, when you get used to doing if for that long you get withdrawal symptoms when you can't come" (Ben). Other words they used to describe their training experience included "buzz," "adrenaline," and "addictive."

Hating. Not all of the emotions associated with training were positive for these co-participants. For some, negative emotions towards training were expressed in language often used to describe the training of military personnel:

> I would pretty much say you get absolutely broken down – I have never done a Marine Corps course or anything like that but every time I have watched things on it they say they break

> you down physically and mentally and that is pretty much what boxing is. For the first, I would say, four weeks of training camp it is just absolute murder. I hate it because you have had pretty much of a rest since your last fight and you basically kill your body. (Dan)

One co-participant compared the challenges of his current career as a boxer to the comparatively lesser ones of his previous career as a professional soccer player:

> Probably how hard it is. With coming from a football background where you used to train at half ten and you were done for half twelve or one o'clock … in the pub by two o'clock … that was pretty much where I came from. But coming to a boxing environment where you are training three times a day – sometimes you are going into your third session and your body is absolutely killing, but you know you have to get through it and you haven't got that for just a couple of days, you have got that for six weeks. So mentally it tires you out as well more than anything. It is the hardest sport on the planet – it gets every single muscle aching and after all that training you've got a fight to come, so it definitely stands out, just the sheer pain you have to go through for six … seven … eight weeks. (Dan)

Another boxer expressed just how relentless the demands of training can be:

> Just how difficult it is really, just to get yourself up in a morning and then get yourself to the gym in the afternoon and I hate it sometimes. You know and eat right, go to bed at right times and things like that really. Just mentally and physically it's hard. (Chris)

Loving/hating. While this theme was split to provide examples of both emotions, the co-participants often mentioned loving and hating at the same time. In the following statement, one boxer tried to explain the tension in loving a sport that many people don't understand:

> Basically you've got to be in absolute love with the sport, I love what I'm doing. So when I wake up to go for a run, I enjoy running - not every morning but stick the ipod on go…you think a lot when you run, your punches, the fight you've got coming up and things like that so it's not a chore to me 'cause it's something I love doing. To other people who don't love boxing, they think, "Are you mad? You do that every day?" - yeah but I enjoy it. I enjoy doing the strength and conditioning, I enjoy doing the sparring and the pad work but it's not a chore to me. It is hard, don't get me wrong, but I don't wake up every morning thinking "Oh shit I've got training today". I wake up thinking, "Right today I'm going to be working on this and this and this" and I love it. I love what I do so it's not really a problem to me. (Dan)

Another boxer expressed his own contrasting emotions towards the training:

> It's hard work, it's a nightmare, it's horrible, it's tiresome, it's demanding, it takes your time up - all those things but I love it. I love training, I like to get fit, I like to see myself looking good. (Eddie)

Overall, despite the difficulties and demands of training none of these boxers expressed regret that they had entered the sport. Rather, most boxers talked about being in complete love with professional boxing. They seemed to embrace the ongoing physical and mental demands of training and many took pride in competing in a sport that is so notoriously difficult.

Preparing

The theme of *Preparing* encompassed the four previous themes, *Sacrificing*, *Finding Support*, *Fearing*, and *Loving/Hating*, and was seen as necessary by the boxers for *Achieving*

Potential. Preparing incorporated more than the training elements of a boxer's life and could be separated in three sub-themes: *Dieting*, *Mentally Preparing*, and *Conditioning*

Dieting. The sport of boxing uses weight categories to match athletes of similar physical stature. Boxers usually try to fight at the lowest possible weight in order to allow them to maximize their power while still retaining the physical energy to compete. Although large fluctuations in boxers' body weight may occur between training and competition, most boxers prefer to remain within 10-15 lbs of their official fight weight.

Diet and weight control were salient aspects of these boxers' experience of training for competition. As Adam emphasized, "I make the weight but whatever weight it is not easy. I think whatever weight you're ever going to be it's not going to be easy, but as you get old it does get harder to make weight." For these boxers dieting included both what they consumed and what they couldn't partake of. One stated, "The hardest thing about boxing I have always said is your diet – and what your diet involves – obviously not going out drinking with your mates, socializing" (Adam). Although some boxers struggled with their weight others found maintaining weight to be easier. Frank said:

> Ummm it's not too bad for me…it usually takes me four weeks…I usually train a lot longer than that but diet and everything, strict diet for like a month, four weeks and that. I can do my weight no problems. I've usually only got 10lbs to lose. I know it sounds like a lot in terms of weight but compared to some fighters and that, it's not a lot to get off. (Frank)

The ease with which Frank was able to control his weight seemed to stem from the discipline with which he approached all aspects of his training. "I'm usually pretty disciplined with myself

so I don't try and cheat out of training or cheat on my diet or anything 'cause obviously I wanta win and everything so that's what I've gotta do." Other co-participants saw food as something they had to control: "Make sure you eat right, you've gotta eat right" (Chris). Some of the boxers who had shifted weight categories in their careers in an attempt to find that optimal weight for performance found dieting difficult:

> Well, I were national champion when I were 17 and that were at flyweight which is 51 kilos. It proper killed me to get to that, I had to diet, I had to discipline myself, I had to train all the time – come to the gym. I had to eat proper things; I had to go to bed early, just to make sure I had every advantage I could have, just to make sure I could win.
>
> (Greg)

Not surprisingly, dieting affected the energy levels of some of the boxers:

> Yeah it killed me; I've never had to diet like that ever in me life. I'm not the biggest kid in the world, but I didn't have anything in me. Like when I boxed in the final, I felt so rough I felt like I had no energy because I starved myself and didn't eat much but I ate as much as I could but it didn't give me much energy. (Greg)

As important as losing weight was for these boxers eating the correct types and quantities of certain foods was also essential. As one stated, "I've got to eat the right foods – carbohydrates. Knowing when to put them in your body and things like that" (Dan). Greg emphasized proper diet as well:

> Eating proper things like fruit, your pasta and everything. It makes just such a difference; well I felt it, like other times when I've ate crap foods, not trained right well and fought.

> And other times when I've ate good, trained good and fought I've not even felt tired after the fight. I've felt like I could fight it again. (Greg)

Mentally Preparing. Mental preparation was another important component of these athletes' training for competition. As Frank put it, "Boxing is a lot about mental – you know. You've gotta prepare yourself well mentally, 'cause you're there on your own." The boxers talked about the mental qualities needed to be able to train and compete in boxing; however, they differed in their opinions about how these mental skills are developed. Some inferred a cause-and-effect relationship with physical training; that is, if they did enough physical training they knew they would be mentally strong. An example was mentioned by Dan who was undefeated in nine fights: "I think they go hand in hand and if you don't do the physical preparation then mentally you will be all over the place". Other boxers suggested that mental strengths were more like traits that boxers needed in order to train and compete effectively:

> I dunno 'cause I just get on with it. It's hard to describe but I think it's just mental will – if you wanta do it, you'll do it and if you can't, then I don't think you've got a strong enough mental will. (Eddie)

All of the co-participants acknowledged that mental skills were vital for training as well as in competition. Most felt that the quality of their preparation affected them mentally:

> Yeah definitely, like [Russell -trainer] always says, "As long as you know you've sat in the changing room before you go and know you've trained hard and you've prepared then, then you'll do well and do your best." Everyone gets beat and things like that but that doesn't frighten…scare me, getting beat or whatever. Obviously, I wanta win but I

> just want to make sure…If I'm prepared well and I lose – so be it! You know, if I haven't and I lose I'll kick myself forever about it. (Frank)

The feeling of "being prepared" seemed to be associated with the theme of *Letting Self and/or Others Down.* These boxers seemed to take comfort from knowing that irrespective of the results of a fight they could be reasonable happy if they knew they had done everything possible to prepare. For example, Chris who was 38 and had not successful career stated:

> Yep, very important, yep very important. If you feel like you've prepared right then you're going to be alright for the fight. If you've done everything, even if the other guy is better than you then at least you know you've done everything you can before the fight and contributed what you could.

Conversely, the feeling being under prepared had a large negative psychological affect on the co-participants:

> I thought, "Oh I haven't done this as much" and it has a right big psychological affect 'cause then you're thinking, "Oh have I done enough?" I didn't train as hard as I'd done for the last fight I think. You might think you feel as fit but I'm sure I felt fitter before and you don't want things playing on your mind. (Eddie)

Greg also talked about how a lack of preparation produced doubts in his mind:

> You're in the changing room; warming-up and you're just thinking to yourself, "Have I trained hard enough? Have I done much running? Have I ate properly?" They're the things that are going through your head before the fight and when you get in the ring you can feel all those things – "No you haven't trained hard enough, you haven't done no road-work, you're legs have gone, you're energy has gone" that's it. (Greg)

Other co-participants talked about how a lack of mental preparation could drain a boxer's energy levels before a fight. One said, "But if you're not mentally prepared it can physically drain you. And if you get drained before you get into the ring because of being nervous, you'll come unstuck. And great fighters have lost because they weren't mentally prepared" (Ian). These boxers seemed to see physical and mental preparation as being intertwined. Boxers could not develop the physical skills necessary unless they had the mental strength to go through the training; yet, strong physical skills could assist in the development of mental toughness. As one co-participant stated:

> It doesn't matter how physically prepared you are if you're not mentally prepared it can drain you. You can be sitting in them changing rooms, waiting to be called to fight but by the time you get in and the first bell rings, your body's fatigued without you even realizing it. You've just been draining energy by not being mentally prepared…your body is draining of energy. Psychologically, psychologically it can be warfare and some fighters are so brilliant at psychologically, psyching out their opponent. And the battles can be won and lost in the changing room. (Ian)

One of the boxers even stated that mental preparation was far more important than physical preparation: "If you think…you've got someone who is physically prepared but not mentally prepared against someone who is mentally prepared the mentally prepared one is going to win isn't he? Mentality is a massive percentage." (Ben)

Conditioning. Although mental preparation was of paramount importance to these professional boxers, they seemed to recognize that the brain could not be detached from the body

and that what happens to one affects the other. For them, a mentally prepared boxer without the necessary physical skills and conditioning would be extremely limited in his/her performance:

> If you're going to do the "tour-de-France" and you only train for three days you're going to get to that fucking mountain and your legs are on fucking fire, you're not going to make it so it's the same as boxing – if you've got a 12 round fight coming up and you're only sparring for six rounds, when it comes to rounds 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 you're going to have nothing left. So I think without the preparation you're going to be "dead in the water". (Dan)

Dan clearly believed that if a person is going to participate in something difficult then it is vital to physically prepare properly. Many of the boxers talked about the importance of running in order to build stamina. One said:

> I was never mad keen on running. I never liked the running but it's so important for fighters to go out…whether it be the early morning or late at night - different fighters have their own training schedules but running is the most important. Of all the training that you do, the running is so important…it's good for stamina and if you get drawn into a hard fight where you're going to have your stamina drained from you in a hard war fight. Hard trench-warfare fight, and unless you've put the miles in on the road, it doesn't matter how much gym work you've put in or the sparring you've done, it's the running that gets the stamina. It's the most important…to me it's probably THE most important part of a fighter's training regime – the miles on the road. (Ian)

Greg also talked about how he had failed to prepare for a fight by not running the necessary miles:

> After the fight I thought, I'm never coming into a fight without running again. It's not good enough...You just feel sick 'cause you've got no energy and you're trying to chuck punches – you know what you wanta do but you can't do it 'cause you've got no strength to do it.

Although some of the boxers did not enjoy the running aspect of training others embraced it and knew clearly just how important it was:

> It's a tough sport in the fact (pause) that you're pushing yourself to newer levels. Like you're pushing yourself fitness-wise, you wake up next day and you've got aches and pains but yet you get up and do a 6 or 7 mile run in the morning but no matter how hard you've pushed yourself during training, afterwards you feel like a million dollars. It's quite funny really how you can push yourself to that level and still feel good about it even though you're hurting, your body's hurting. (Harry)

While running provided these boxers with the foundation of their cardiovascular fitness, sparring allowed them to gauge their fitness level and boxing skills in a more competition-like environment. Some of the boxers found sparring extremely demanding:

> I enjoy the running. I do quite a bit anyway. I don't mind the fitness aspect. The hardest part was sparring, always the hardest part was sparring. It's still hard now for me 'cause I'm just not as skilled as other guys – it's enjoyable but it's hard, yeah hard mentally and physically 'cause you think, "What's the other guy going to do?" and you've gotta try and be one step in front of him all the time. So it's [sparring] demanding, physically and mentally. (Chris)

The difficulty and reality of sparring was also emphasized by Ian who was a heavyweight:

> Well I was in with some of the hardest punchers in the world so the intensity of the spar… To prepare for some of these fights that they were going to be in the sparring had to be intense. So there was no point in kinda "molly coddling" [going easy] a sparring session so they had to be intense. Some of the sparring sessions I've witnessed and been involved in have been better than the actual fights. The fights haven't lived up to the hype whereas the sparring sessions have been so intense that they've been better than some of the fights. So they were intense sparring sessions all over the world that I was involved in as a sparring partner.

These boxers believed that the intensity and difficulty of conditioning had to be high so fighters would be prepared should the match go the full distance in rounds:

> So a lot of times your training camps are harder than your fight. If you speak to a lot of boxers they will say that training is harder than the fight because the fight is kind of what you train for, so it is, I don't know whether you could say "enjoyable," but it is part and parcel of it. (Dan)

The required combination of physical and mental preparation makes boxing an extremely difficult sport to train and compete in. Eddie, who had previously sought the advice of a sport psychology consultant nicely, synthesized the demands of boxing on the mind and body:

> Ummm I think if you believe you can do something then you can achieve it. What your mind tells you…if you set your mind to a task like, "I'm gonna do that no matter what" then you can push your body through it definitely. (Eddie)

Achieving Potential

The results of this study revealed that *Achieving Potential* was the background against which boxers' experience of training for competition was set. The boxers talked about *Achieving Potential* in two ways: (a) *Not Cheating,* and (b) *Status and Success*.

Not cheating. In order for these boxers to prepare correctly and achieve their potential it was important for them to know that they had not "cheated" themselves. As one put it:

> I mean, you know before I go into a fight I have a little mental checklist in me head. I've done all my runs; I've not missed any of my runs, done my sparring. I check this, I check that – I check them off and then I know that when I go into the ring I am ready. So mentally that makes me strong – I am not thinking, "I hope it doesn't go past six rounds" because I didn't do that run or I missed that last sparring session. (Dan)

Dan went on to emphasize how cutting corners and cheating could prevent a boxer from achieving his/her potential:

> You know NOT cutting corners; I refuse to cut any sorts of corners. Like I said if I'm up…If I have a run scheduled for the next day then I'll run. If I've got sparring 10 rounds, I'll do 10 I won't do 9 – do you know what I mean? If I'm skipping for 3 rounds then I'll do 3 not 2 ½ or 2 ¾, I'll do 3 - that's 120% . Loads of people in our gym have the talent but they don't have the dedication. They'll probably get to a certain level, some people might get to be a British champion just through talent but they've wasted their talent if they've got the talent to be a world champion and only become a British champion and they've pissed it away. So it's all about getting the best of out of what you can get out of yourself. (Dan)

The old proverb "You get out what you put in" seemed to describe the feeling of these boxers. As one said:

> If you're cheating yourself…well if you cheat, you're only cheating yourself. So if you wanta get knocked out and you wanta get beat then basically don't train hard. But if you wanta win – and its all I think about is winning so that's why I train like that. I wanta win – that's it! (Eddie)

Doing all the correct training and not cutting corners or cheating had obvious physical benefits but also helped the following boxer become mentally stronger:

> People ask me what is my biggest strength and I say my mental toughness, because of what I have had to come through just to be a boxer. I've give up football [soccer], I've give up a well paid job, to do this, so it's nothing - I know this is the "last chance saloon" for me. If I balls up this then I have nowhere else to go, so, that makes me mentally strong that enables me not to cut corners. Like I said, I'm not the most naturally gifted boxer on the planet, so I need to work on my game, so I never… like I say … I never cut corners. To this day I have not cut a corner in boxing and that makes me mentally rock solid. (Dan)

Status and success. Ultimately, the level of a boxer's success is determined by his/her career record and titles won. Titles were the yardstick by which many of these boxers judged the extent to which they were achieving their potential:

> I wanta be English champion…After that move on to Commonwealth champion and then after that hopefully a world title fight and that will be like 25 to 30 fights. That's what I'm looking at anyway. And I don't wanta be beaten, I wanta be the best. (Greg)

For others it was the fame came from winning titles that was appealing: “End goals, I wanta win titles. I want everyone to know my name. I want to be on TV” (Eddie). Generally, it seemed to be the younger boxers that articulated a great desire for success. As Greg said, “I don’t know, I wanta be the best, I wanta be a winner, I wanta be recognized, I wanta be the best boxer in me weight in the country and probably the world if I could.”

In boxing, titles are contested at all levels so boxers can judge their potential against the standard they aspire to achieve:

> The one thing that stands out is winning my [country] title. That to me…because I never had the ability to be champion of the world. Winning the [country] title – [country] was my world. [Country] was my world title and I won [two country] titles. (Ian)

Even though some of the older boxers were less vocal about their ambitions they expressed appreciation for the benefits of winning. As Dan put it:

> Believe you me, when it is five o’clock in the morning and there is snow and ice on the floor it is not nice getting up. But when you get to a fight and you get a win and all the accolades that come with it, I mean that you are just glad that you pushed yourself and done all the training, but physically, it is nothing like anything I have ever done before. (Dan)

For some of the boxers gaining and maintaining a reputation within the sport was important:

> Yeah, I don’t know, I’ve got to try and put up a good fight – entertainment and that. That’s what I wanta be – I wanta be a good fighter. I don’t wanta be boring, not chucking no shots or anything. I wanta be busy all the time, I wanta knock-out punch, I wanta be a knock-out boxer and just be the best there is. (Greg)

Some of the older boxers who were coming towards the end of their careers reflected upon their success and whether they had achieved their potential. Some perceived that they had failed to reach their potential and it represented a source of regret. For several, achieving potential seemed synonymous with winning more fights. One said, “Yeah, yeah, I knew I were never gonna be a world champion. I know I’m limited [but] I thought I could have done a bit more. When I look back I have some regrets about me ability, maybe I’ve sold myself short at times” (Chris). While Chris regretted not achieving his potential he continually stated that he had enjoyed his career.

Harry, another boxer coming to the end of his career, suggested that people don’t always know their own potential and that the guidance of others during a boxing career is important:

> Just when you’re boxing, sometimes you don’t realize your potential. Because you’re in the thick of things, it’s your career and you’re doing it. Looking back to when I were younger I wish I had had more guidance of people or listened to people more that had been around boxing. It’s only now that I’m near the end that I realize that. Some of things that people said to me I didn’t take on-board and I wish I’d kinda taken that stuff on-board, ‘cause I could have achieved a lot more out of it. (Harry)

One of the "older boxers put his career in perspective when reflecting upon one of his defeats.

> I fought some great fighters and gave a good account of myself. It wasn’t because of fitness that I lost, it was because I was in against a better fighter. It was a great honor to share the ring with them. You know, I lost on a close decision to [Allan Young] and it was a great honor to share the ring with him. He didn’t beat me ‘cause he was fitter than

> me; he beat me ‘cause he was a better fighter. It was a great honor to share the ring with him. (Ian)

The concept of achieving potential seemed to be a lot more exciting for those boxers who were in the relatively early stages of their careers. One stated:

> I don’t know what my potential is yet – you know what I mean? I’ve still not found my level yet; I’m still progressing as a fighter, getting better every fight. I’m undefeated in nine fights so it would be stupid for me to say, “I want to do this” when I might be able to go further - you know what I mean? My main ambition is to reach my potential, wherever that will take me – know what I mean? I mean, I’d love to become a British champion and that would be amazing for me but I’m not just going to say, “Right, that’s all I wanta win, ‘cause when I’ve won it I might start cutting corners, ‘cause I might be able to be European or Commonwealth champion.” I don’t believe in setting those sorts of goals because when you reach them you can start to become a little bit sloppy – there is always something more you can achieve. (Dan)

Dan aspired to becoming a British champion but refused to set goals for himself in terms of titles alone because he felt this might impose an artificial ceiling on his potential. Ian perhaps summarized the theme of *Achieving Potential* best in the following quote:

> I had the dreams…I had the dreams that every fighter has – the same dreams – to win a world title. Every fighter that climbs through the ropes has dreams of winning a world title but I wasn’t good enough. But I dreamed the same dream that Ricky Hatton dreamed, the same dream Muhammad Ali dreamed, the same dream Mike Tyson dreamed, the same dream as Joe Frazier, the same dream as George Foreman. And you

> go through the centuries, from when boxing started and every fighter has had the same dream but there's only a certain few that get to live the dream. (Ian)

In summary, irrespective of their previous successes each co-participant was heavily invested in the notion of achieving their own potential. While some quantified potential in terms of titles and career record, others related potential to "doing their best" regardless of their win-loss record.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion

The title of my dissertation: “fail to prepare, prepare to fail” really encapsulates the overall essence of the results. This was a direct quote from Chris but the meaning is reflected throughout the other eight transcripts. The notion that if you fail to prepare correctly then you should be prepared to fail really speaks to boxers’ of experience of training for competition.

The demands of professional sport in today’s society mean an athlete’s life inherently revolves around his/her sport, with each individual dedicating countless hours to training. These hours of preparation are necessary in order to compete at the highest level. Through preparation, athletes and coaches ultimately strive to reach their potential. Whether potential is something anyone can ever fully attain is debatable. Yet, both athletes and coaches find comfort in knowing they “did their best” irrespective of the outcome. Sport simply has too many variables to judge someone’s potential based on his/her win/loss record.

As preparation is key to achieving potential, the present study represented an attempt to assess professional boxers’ experiences of training for competition. To date, only a few studies have investigated boxing from a sport psychology perspective (Lane, 2006, 2008, in press; Schinke, 2004, 2007). However, none of this research has captured the experience of the boxer in training for competition. By focusing on boxers’ experiences of training rather than their reflections about competition, the results in this study offer a more comprehensive picture of the factors surrounding the notion of preparation.

This chapter discusses the *Major Findings*, provide *Connections to Previous Research,* offers *Practical Implications* for the findings, suggests *Future Directions* for research and gives *Concluding* remarks.

Major Findings

The results of in-depth phenomenological interviews with nine professional boxers revealed six major dimensions that characterized their experience of training for competition: *Achieving Potential*, *Preparing, Sacrificing, Finding Support, Fearing,* and *Loving/Hating.* A visual depiction of the thematic structure and interaction between the various dimensions is shown in Figure 1. Training for a professional sport is something only a select few individuals ever get to experience. The level of interest in professional sport suggests that the sporting public finds fascination in the many dimensions of athletes' lives, including the outcome of training (i.e., performance) and the training itself. Countless books, DVD's and websites now offer advice and training schedules to enable the general public to train like a professional athlete. Yet, replicating the training experience is not the same as reproducing the experience. The results of this study revealed that the physical and technical components of a professional boxer's training are only one component of the training experience.

The four major grounds in existential phenomenology are *Time, Body, World,* and *Others* (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). The six major dimensions revealed in the transcripts of these boxers' interviews appeared to be connected in several ways to these major grounds. *Time* was present in the dimensions of *Sacrificing* and *Achieving Potential*. The *Body* was the ground against which the notion of *Preparing* emerged. The *World* was incorporated in the emotions of *Fearing*

and *Loving/Hating.* Lastly, *Others* appeared to be the ground against which *Finding Support* could be understood.

Although the four major grounds are, of course, vital, the most significant finding of the present study was that *Achieving Potential* was the ground against which boxers' experiences of training for competition emerged. Ultimately, four of the dimensions- *Sacrificing, Fearing, Finding Support,* and *Loving/Hating*-were connected to the need to *Prepare* in order for the boxers to give themselves the best possible chance of *Achieving* their *Potential.* The dimensions of *Sacrificing* and *Finding Support* appeared in some ways to lie in opposition to each other. For example, these boxers sacrificed time with their family and friends yet simultaneously needed the support of those individuals. *Fearing* was the emotion that drove the boxers to prepare as diligently as possible whereas, *Loving/Hating* were dynamic emotions that encompassed the entire experience of training for competition. Although these dimensions were presented and discussed separately it is important to emphasize that all dimensions interact to form these boxers' experience of training for competition.

New Findings

The current study found a substantial amount of new findings not previously discussed in research. The concept of *Achieving Potential* has not been previously mentioned within literature on boxing. Although the importance of winning for these boxers should not be discounted, more pertinent to them was the feeling that they'd done their best.

Unexpectedly, perhaps, it was found that boxers spoke openly about their fears. From an outsider's perspective a fear of injury would seem rational due to the physical nature of the sport;

however this was not the case. Rather an intense fear of losing and letting themselves and others down are what professional boxers feared the most.

The dynamic emotions boxers felt towards their sport also stood out from the study. While the physical and mental demands of training helped generate strong negative emotions these were always counteracted by their long-standing love for the sport. Interestingly, boxers talked openly about their emotions and seemed much attuned to them throughout the interview process.

A key finding of this study was the importance of gym partners in the professional boxers' experiences of training for competition. Gym partners provided advice to each other, they bonded with one another, and they provided light relief in terms of fun and humor and yet, were needed for rivalry and competition throughout the training process. The findings from this study suggest that the importance of gym partners cannot be underestimated in professional boxing.

Lastly, although it seems obvious that a trainer would play an integral role within boxers' experiences of training for competition it was their ability to show that they cared about the health of the athlete that was most appreciated. While, technical, tactical and conditioning knowledge was important in the boxer-trainer relationship it was the humanistic or personal side of the relationship which really mattered to the boxers.

Overall, this study has produced an array of new findings relating to professional boxers' experiences of training for competition. These findings should be applied throughout the professional boxing community in order to enhance the experience of training for participants.

While also producing new findings this study has confirmed and extended upon previous research.

Connections and Extensions of Previous Research

Previous research has suggested a need for individuals with applied training in sport psychology to provide services for participants in the sport of boxing (Lane, 2006, 2008, in press; Schinke, 2004; 2007). This notion was expressed by Schinke (2004) who stated that "Within the sport of professional boxing, there is a 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" (¶ 3). The results of previous research have suggested a number of generic psychological skills that might be important for boxers, including confidence, commitment, determination, focus, and managing emotions (Lane, 2006, 2008, in press; Milton, 2005; Schinke, 2004; 2007; Wacquant, 1992). The results of the present study suggest that a number of these skills were important to these boxers' experience of training for competition, focus being the only exception. It is important to note that although previous sport psychology researchers have examined the sport of boxing it has been from a third person practitioner perspective (e.g., Lane, 2006, 2008, in press; Schinke, 2004; 2007). The current study was the first to capture the experience of boxing through the lens of the participants themselves.

Wacquant (1995a) suggested that a boxer's diet could produce tremendous psychological suffering. Although some boxers in this study found dieting to be arduous others seemed to have no problem controlling their diet or their weight. Wacquant (1992) also perceived that boxers had to be obedient to a large set of gym rules; yet, not a single boxer in the present study

mentioned “gym rules”. This finding does not mean that rules did not exist for these boxers but rather that they were not a figural aspect within the greater context of training.

Previous research (Lane, 2008; Milton, 2004; Schinke, 2007; Wacquant, 1992) has suggested that boxers need to be able to control their emotions both prior to and during fights. Although the actual competitive matches were not a focus of the present study most of the boxers talked about their experiences of competition and how they struggled to control their emotions, especially before a fight. Interestingly, none mentioned struggling to control their emotions during the fight; instead, they kept “their heads clear” and trusted “their training to take over.” The results were, however, consistent with Milton’s (2005) contention that combative sport participants paradoxically become more determined, confident, and nervous closer to the beginning of the fight. Boxers in this study talked about the importance of being confident yet mentioned that they continually struggled with their nerves and fears before fights.

One of the major findings of the current study was boxers’ need for social support both inside and outside the gym. This result is consistent with previous research showing that boxers need a “team” around them to provide support in numerous ways (Lane, in press; Milton, 2005; Schinke, 2007). Most importantly, boxers needed to know that their trainer cared about their health above all else. This finding is consistent with Becker (2009) who found that great coaches were seen by their athletes as being more than just a coach. The 18 elite athletes suggested that a large part of great coaching was caring about the *person* and not just the *athlete* (Becker, 2009). The present findings suggest that the importance of boxers’ social support cannot be underestimated.

Wacquant (1998) found that most boxers resent being underpaid in their profession. Although some of the boxers in the current study seemed to hold this view others accepted their current financial position and simply deemed it a necessary sacrifice for those who choose to enter the boxing profession. In spite of the fact that their earning potential was not high some of the participants held very positive expectations of making decent money before their career was over.

Lastly, previous sociological research on boxing has suggested that issues of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, masculinity, physical identity and categorization may play a role in a boxer's experience (Delgado, 2005; Donnelly, 1998; Jones, 1997; Hargreaves, 1997; Hassan, 2005; Heiskanen, 2006; Mennesson, 2000; Messner, 1992; Wacquant, 1992, 1998; Weinberg & Arnold, 1952). However, the boxers in the current study did not mention any of these factors when describing their experience of training for competition. This does not mean that such factors were not a part of these boxers' experiences and that had greater trust been established between the researcher and the co-participants some of the factors might have been addressed. A lack of racial/ethnic diversity within the sample may have contributed to the lack of discussion surrounding some issues. It is also important to keep in mind that the research question in this study did not ask the co-participants to reflect upon their experiences of boxing with regards to sociological issues. As in any phenomenological research had the initial question been phrased differently it would inevitably produced different findings. However, to speculate on such different findings would not be appropriate. The results of the current study perhaps show that deeper and broader social issues are not a figural aspect of professional boxers the experiences of training for competition.

Practical Implications

The results of this study offer several practical implications for trainers, boxers and sport psychology practitioners wishing to enhance the quality of the training experience of participants. The concept of "praxis" deals with "the integration of theory, research, and practice" (Fisher et al. 2003, p. 397). The present results suggest that boxers would benefit from the assistance of sport psychology professionals regarding the issues of dieting, mental/emotional preparation, and financial management. Trainers can help boxers by continually motivating and challenging them to pursue their goals in the "right way" while also showing understanding and empathy for boxers during their hardships. Family, friends, and gym partners need to be reminded of the important supporting role they play for the boxer throughout the training process, irrespective of how the relatively little time they spend with the boxer affects them personally. Lastly, boxers can be encouraged to maintain a balance between their training and life commitments without compromising their dedication to achieving their potential.

The following list is based on the findings of this study and suggests possible strategies for the various people who hold a prominent place in boxers' lives. It is important to note that these recommendations are unlikely to dramatically alter the notoriously difficult demands of boxing training; however they may serve to improve the life quality of professional boxers.

Trainers can:

- demonstrate that they have the boxers' "best interests at heart" and emphasize that the boxer's health is their primary concern.

- keep training challenging and fun by making training sessions both physically and mentally while providing time for gym partners to interact and enjoy each others company.
- help boxers rationalize their fears.
- show empathy for the sacrifices their boxers are making in order to train and compete.

Sport Psychology Consultants can:

- help boxers mentally prepare for both training and competition by helping them develop skills that enhance self-confidence, emotional control, goal-setting, dealing with injury, life skills, dealing with adversity, enjoyment, motivation, and arousal/emotional control.

Family and Friends can:

- show understanding regarding the sacrifices a boxer must make during training (e.g., the lack of time available for socializing or the inability to indulge in activities like drinking alcohol and eating certain foods).
- inform the boxer that the outcome of fights does not determine how they feel about the him/her.

Gym Partners can:

- provide helpful advice for each other regarding boxing as well as other life issues.
- motivate and encourage each other during training and competition.
- make training fun while still being serious during training.

Boxers can:

- avoid “cheating” or “cutting corners” during training or with their diet.
- identify, apply and accept the sacrifices required to be a professional athlete.
- show gratitude towards all those who make personal sacrifices for them.

Future Directions

The results of this study provide a strong foundation for additional research on professional boxing. The results regarding boxers’ experiences of training for competition could be examined in more detail by obtaining information from the perspective of trainers and family/friends. While this study focused on individual sport athletes, it might also be beneficial to determine the applicability of these results to athletes participating in team sports. Future studies might examine the actual experience of “competing” in professional boxing. The results of this study related to male boxers from the UK, future research could compare experiences with boxers from other countries and also investigate the training experiences of female boxers. As the sample contained individuals who predominantly self-identified themselves as *White* future research should investigate the experiences of boxers’ from different racial/ethnic groups. Finally, future studies might be designed to test the efficacy of the training model that emerged from boxers’ experiences of training for competition.

Conclusion

The results of this study suggest that boxers who aspire to achieve their full potential understand that this individual sport is quintessentially a “team” sport. Although alone in ring, the professional boxers in this study understood that they were unable to reach a satisfactory

competitive level on their own and needed the help and support of their trainer, gym partners, and family/friends. Their comments suggest that boxers who reflect on and bring understanding to their own participation enhance the quality of their experience of training for competition.

Finally, the results of this study show that these boxers' physical conditioning and technical and tactical training were just a portion of their experience of training for competition. While less quantifiable, it was the subjective experience of the boxers that this study captured. Irrespective of whether they realized it, these boxers ultimately wished to achieve their potential, whatever that represented for each of them. In order to achieve this potential, they had to prepare correctly both inside and outside the gym. They also had to sacrifice, face their fears, find support from others, and accept the contrasting emotions of love and hate in their quest to achieve their respective potential.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Example of field notes.

It's December 23rd and I've just finished two interviews in [town]. I think they went real well; well it's hard to tell I guess but anyways I'm happy I got them done 'cause the gym is closing today for Christmas. As for the gym well it was difficult to find, well tucked away in not a great part of town. The fact it's pissing down didn't help. Anyways, what struck me was just how old and dirty it looked from the outside with a tiny little old sign I walked past it four times. I was again a bit nervous when I went in. I could here all the noises from the gym as I walked up the stairs. It sounded so exciting but yeah I was a bit nervous. Not sure why, [trainers name] knew I was coming but I'd never been here before. It's freezing outside but it was no warmer in there. What struck me when I walked in was how crowded the gym was. There's probably 30 big heavy bags hanging from chains and every one of them was being used. A few lads were taping the hands and the two rings were being used for sparring. A fella [man] called [name] greeted me and was real pleasant. [Trainers name] was super nice too and told me a few of the lads were just finishing off so could I wait for a while. I could see my breath inside the gym it was that cold but the movement and energy of the gym was great. There's a big timing clock on the wall which is set to three minutes and every exercise is done to that obviously 'cause of round length. Something else was interesting…there were young lads like eight or nine training right next to grown men and everyone was touching gloves and laughing after each exercise although the during the time the intensity of the punches is mad, one big lad was punching the bag so hard it was swaying – like body punches. I could feel myself wincing at every punch…I know for a fact now I could never have been a boxer haha. I've seen it live and that but being so close [to the action] was scary actually. Yeah, yeah, just the coldness and intensity really stood out but everyone seemed to be loving it but I guess they were moving. The first interview with [name] went real well actually he was a super nice bloke, he looked shattered after training but I never got the impression he wanted to leave. Real honest and seemed pretty confident to me. I think my questions were good but I guess I'll see when I analyze it. [Name] he was a bit quieter…well a lot quieter and didn't give me real long answers. In fact, it was like getting blood out of a stone but he did his best I guess. He was younger than [first boxer] so maybe that makes a different. I think I might have led him on the odd occasion but it was so hard because he'd just stop talking after a few seconds and I'd have to really think on the spot. Nice lad though and actually training he was so quick it was crazy. Tiny fella [man] but hands were crazy fast. He could punch me like three or four times before I'd even move. Anyway, yeah, think it went well but it's hard to tell until I transcribe.

Appendix B

Demographic Information

Name:

Age:

Nationality:

Professional record:

Number of years as a professional:

Weight category:

Email and/or postal address:

Race/ethnicity:

Appendix C

Informed Consent Statement

INTRODUCTION
You are invited to participate in a research study I am conducting for my doctoral dissertation at the University of Tennessee. The purpose of this study is to learn more about professional boxers' experience of training for competition.

INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS' INVOLVEMENT IN THE STUDY
Should you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview at a time and location of your choosing. During the interview you will be asked to describe in as much detail as possible your experiences of training for competition. I may occasionally ask follow-up questions to gain further clarification or to obtain additional details to previous comments.

The interview should last approximately 30-60 minutes depending on the depth of your responses. I will audio record the interview and then transcribe it (i.e., type it out on paper) for further analysis. I will then let you look at your transcript to be sure it accurately portrays what you were trying to say in your interview. You may choose to adjust or delete any part of the interview in order to provide a more accurate description of your experience.

RISKS
You will be asked to select a pseudonym - a fake name - for this study, which I will substitute for your real name whenever you make comments that might identify you. This is done to help preserve the confidentiality of your responses. Further, in an effort to preserve your confidentiality I will only share your interview with members of the research group assisting me in this study and with the faculty members on my dissertation committee.

BENEFITS
Potential benefits from participation in this study include to the opportunity for you to: (a) add your perspective to the limited body of research concerning professional boxing and (b) perhaps uncover a deeper meaning and understanding of your participation in boxing.

Participant's Initials _____

CONFIDENTIALITY
I will use the results of this research for my PhD dissertation. The results will be coded in such a way that participants' identity will not be revealed in any manuscript or publication resulting from this study. While individual participants' responses will remain confidential in written reports, aggregate data representing generalizations about all participants' responses will be discussed. All audio recordings and transcripts will be stored in a secure location and will be made available only to persons conducting the study unless you specifically give permission in writing to do otherwise. Upon completion of the study, all information that matches you with your answers, including audio tapes, will be destroyed.

CONTACT INFORMATION
If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, (or you experience adverse effects as a result of participating in this study,) you may contact the researcher, Duncan Simpson (865) 974-8768. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact the Office of Research Compliance Officer at (865) 974-3466.

PARTICIPATION
Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed your data will be returned to you or destroyed.

STATEMENT OF CONSENT
I have read the above information and have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this study and understand that I will be given a copy of this consent form.

Participant's signature _____ Date _____

Investigator's signature _____ Date _____

VITA

Duncan Simpson was born April 28, 1980 in Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania to loving parents John and Gina Simpson. He attended Leeds Metropolitan University, Leeds, England, achieving a Bachelor of Arts degree in Physical Education and a Master of Science degree in Sport and Exercise Science. He taught at the University of Leeds before attending the University of Tennessee to complete his graduate education. Duncan received his Doctor of Philosophy degree in Exercise and Sport Sciences with concentration in Sport Studies and a specialization in Sport Psychology.