

Massage And The Sport Of Boxing

Boxing is one of the few sports handed down to us from the ancient Olympic games. Even back in the 18th century, boxers relied on massage to keep them in top form.



Figure 1. Ancient Greek vase depicts the rough and deadly boxing contests of ancient times, c. 550 BCE. Courtesy of the British Museum.

The 2004 Summer Olympics in Athens were set among the ancient ruins of classic Greek civilization. Particularly inspiring were the sports that originated from the ancient Olympic games—track and field, equestrian arts, wrestling and boxing. They are reminders of the long history of massage as an important part of training in Western sports.

Boxing is one of those sports with an unbroken tradition from ancient times. Combat sports like boxing contests survived through the centuries after the fall of Rome (476 CE*) in village festivals, campground recreation and prizefights. Boxing was revived in

18th century England as a modern sport, gentrified by rules in the 19th century, while finally reaching its second Golden Age in America in the 1920s. Could the tradition of Western boxing, including massage used in training practices, be traced directly to ancient Greece and Rome?

How similar were the uses of massage for training boxers in ancient times to its more recent use in the Golden Age of the 20th century?

Ancient Pugilism

Pugilism (from the Latin *pugnare*, or to fight) was a popular but brutal contest in the ancient Olympic games,

* The dating system used by many historians has been adopted for this article. BCE means "before the common era," replacing BC; and CE means "in the common era," replacing the familiar AD. So BCE=BC, and CE=AD.

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and later in the gladiatorial combats of Rome.

Ancient Olympic boxing was rough and deadly. Boxers of this time covered their hands with a leather thong called a “cestus,” sometimes imbedded with metal spikes. Contests often lasted until one fighter was fatally injured. Figure 1, page 152, shows an ancient boxing contest, c.550 BCE.

Boxing also was considered an essential part of a young man’s education in the gymnasium, although in this context the more brutal aspects of the sport must have been eliminated. The Roman physician, Galen (130–200 CE), is said to have highly valued boxing as an exercise to strengthen the arms, shoulders, and hands and to improve agility. He is even believed to have used boxing as a favorite exercise of his own.¹ Perhaps as today, boxing training methods were used as a fitness activity without engaging in actual bloody combat.

Galen left lengthy descriptions of massage or rubbing, as was used in the ancient gymnasium, where boxing was a familiar activity. The athletes were first given preparatory rubbing or *tripsis paraskeuastike*. “If beforehand you gradually

warm and soften the solids and thin the fluids, and expand the pores, the person exercising will run no danger of breaking any part, nor of blocking up the pores.”

He describes gradually increasing the pressure used from light to hard, and varying the direction of the rubbing. “If however, any mistake is to be made, let it be on the side of hardness; for a few excesses stop at the skin, and effect no change in the internal parts.”²

After exercises, the athletes received apotherapeia, or rubbing “to empty the excretions, and to preserve the body from fatigue.” Galen describes the plentiful use of oil in rubbing “for this contributes to the quickness and softness of the rubbing...for it relaxes tension and softens the parts which have suffered in the more violent kinds of exertion.”²

In ancient times, massage also was used in the treatment of injuries, such as dislocations, broken bones and stiff joints. It was undoubtedly applied to treat the injuries of athletes, including boxers.

Modern Sport Of Boxing

In England, a former Roman colony, pugilism blossomed again in the 1700s

among the wealthier set. Bare-knuckle boxing, also known as fisticuffs, served as an alternative to duels by sword and pistol to preserve a gentleman’s honor. It provided the opportunity for honorable combat without the high potential of someone being killed.

It was even popular among women. The following challenge acceptance appeared in the *London Journal* in 1722: “I, Hannah Highfield, of Newgate Market, hearing of the resoluteness of Elizabeth Wilkinson, will not fail, God willing, to give her more blows than words... She may expect a good thumping.”

It was later reported that “they maintained the battle for a long time, to the no small satisfaction of the spectators.”³ The boxing fashion among women enjoyed a large following in those early years, but eventually died out until recent times.

Rudimentary gloves called “mufflers” were promoted by a popular fighter named James Broughton in the 1740s. A semblance of civility was introduced to an otherwise brutal sport when a boxing code called the *Queensbury Rules* was pub-



Figure 3. Prizefighters outside the gym at Harbin Hot Springs, c. 1900. (l to r): Jim Jeffries, Joe Kennedy, Jack Jeffries, Ruby Bob Fitzsimmons. Courtesy of Harbin Springs Publishing.

lished in 1867. The *Queensbury Rules* introduced the boxing ring, three-minute rounds, the 10-count knockout, boxing gloves and various other rules. The first prizefight under the *Queensbury Rules* was between John L. Sullivan and Dominick McCaffery in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1885. Sullivan won the fight in the sixth round.

The “manly art” of amateur boxing grew in popularity at the end of the 19th century. Boxing was one of the first sports sanctioned by the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) founded in 1888, and appeared in the modern Olympic Games in 1904. Amateur boxing really took off in 1923 after the first Golden Gloves Tournament, which was held at the old Chicago Stadium. The hope of the Golden Gloves sponsors was that “through boxing, neighborhood kids could learn the discipline of directing their energies constructively.”⁴ Many great professional boxers like Joe Louis, Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier got their start as Golden Gloves champions. In Figure 2, opposite page, Joe Louis gets a “rub” from his trainer Jack Blackburn.



Figure 2. Heavyweight champion Joe Louis gets a rubdown from trainer, Jack Blackburn in 1938. Courtesy of Antiquities of the Prize Ring.

Fleischer says that a fighter, to obtain the best out of his workout, should always have his legs rubbed morning and night.

Figure 4.
A young Muhammad Ali (aka Cassius Clay) gets a shoulder massage from trainer Luis Sarria after a strenuous workout, c. 1970. Courtesy of *The Ring's Training for Boxers*, by Nat Fleishman.



Training Camps

In the early 1900s, champion professional fighters took on celebrity status, and fans crowded the training gyms to watch their heroes work out. It became routine for boxers gearing up for a big fight to go to a remote location to focus on training. One of those early training camps was at Harbin Hot Springs in California. Famous boxing champions who trained there included Bob Fitzsimmons (1899), Jim Jeffries (1905), Tommy Burns (1908) and Jess Willard (1915). Boxers training at Harbin, c. 1900 are shown in Figure 3, page 155.

The advantages of training at Harbin were its clean mountain air, “thinner air” to strengthen the lungs, rolling hills to build up the legs and its recreation potential. Reminiscent of the ancient baths, the combination of hot springs and massage helped relax the mind and relieve stiff muscles between bouts of heavy training. In the early 1900s, Harbin had all the facilities and equipment needed for a boxer’s training regimen.⁵ Harbin is a good example of a boxer’s training camp in the early 20th century. It is still operating today as a resort, and offers a massage education program [www.harbin.org].

The Roaring Twenties

Nat Fleischer (1887–1972) was a noted American boxing writer, trainer and original editor of *Ring Magazine*, first published in 1922. He also wrote a manual called *The Ring’s Training for Boxers* in 1927. This 128-page gem offers insight into the use of massage for training boxers in its modern Golden Age in the 1920s.

Fleischer most often used the words *rub* and *rubdown* to describe massage, and *rubber* and *masseur* to describe the massage specialist. While he doesn’t mention massage before exercise specifically, he highly recommends starting the day with a morning plunge or shower, followed by hard friction with a rough towel to “open all the pores of the body and put them in working order to perform their proper functions during the day.”⁶

He called a rubdown after a workout “a fine thing,” and said that “every boxer should get at least one a day.” He describes the usual routine after a workout as taking a shower and drying thoroughly, and then to “get on the rubbing table where he [the boxer] relaxes and then takes his rubdown” lasting from 20 to 40 minutes.⁶