

On Boxing

Critical Interventions in the
Bittersweet Science

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First published 2022

ISBN: 978-1-032-01889-8 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-19669-3 (ebk)

3 Boxer cool

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DOI: 10.4324/9781003196693-3

The funder for this chapter is Joseph D Lewandowski.



ROUTLEDGE

Routledge

Taylor & Francis Group

LONDON AND NEW YORK

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Many athletes strategically adopt a deliberate ‘look’—a ‘game face’, in sport parlance—for the purpose of gaining an edge in competition. Indeed, individual athletes in many sports often intentionally ‘stare down’ opponents, or, conversely, seek to appear carefree, even smiling at an opponent. Others still may opt to exhibit a genuinely emotionless ‘poker face’, in the hope of masking their emotional states and intentions in pursuit of victory. Such deliberate and outward non-verbal bodily strategies of intimidation, misdirection, and masking are a familiar component of many sport competitions, and can play a role, however difficult to ascertain precisely, in winning or losing. Boxers, of course, also engage in embodied attempts to intimidate, misdirect, and mask in the heat of competition. Perhaps one of the most familiar of these is when, in the course of a bout, a boxer is hit cleanly with a crisp blow to the head and responds with a look of nonchalance—casually dropping his guard and shrugging his shoulders as if to say, ‘That all you got?’.

In the literature devoted to the philosophy of sport, this kind of comportment is often theorized via an account of ‘gamesmanship’ (Howe 2004; Leota and Turp 2020). But in a boxer’s comportment vis-à-vis violence there is much more at work than merely a strategic-rational conception of ‘gamesmanship’. In fact, uniquely in boxing (and perhaps other combat sports) this look of pugilistic nonchalance is not merely the deployment of a momentary or intentional individual strategy—as it is in, say, the ‘stare down’ a pitcher engages in with a home-run hitter in baseball. It is, more fundamentally, the manifestation and reflexive adaptation of a culturally inflected pose of undaunted self-mastery in the face of danger.¹ The pitcher’s demeanor is clearly individual and strategic, the boxer’s is far more cultural and dispositional. Gamesmanship is, as the term implies, a *game day* rational strategy; pugilistic nonchalance is an extension of a cultural

DOI: 10.4324/9781003196693-3

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repertoire of orientations vis-à-vis violence. In fact, pugilistic nonchalance—or ‘boxer cool’, as I want to characterize it in this chapter—is never individually reducible to an episodic game day (or ‘fight night’) strategy. Rather, boxer cool is best understood as an athletic extension of a culturally informed and ingrained stance toward the physical and emotional threat or presence of harm.

Put differently, there is a kind of navigational know-how vis-à-vis violence (physical and structural)—a *cultural epistemology of cool*—at work in the practiced air of pugilistic nonchalance. In what follows, I want to amplify key aspects of boxer cool in an effort to capture yet another cultural dimension operative in becoming a boxer. The discussion of boxer cool should also go some way to explaining how and why, as I observed throughout my years in the gym, many individuals who undertake the sport of boxing are, modest athletic abilities aside, somehow willing and able to persist undauntedly in the sport for years.

With the exception of Ralph Wiley’s boxing memoir (1989), the nature and function of pugilistic nonchalance has largely escaped observation in the study of the sport of boxing. Yet even in Wiley’s discussion, boxer cool—or ‘serenity’, as he puts it—gets short shrift. Indeed, the notion of ‘serenity’ serves as the title and organizing principle of the book, but the concept itself remains dormant and merely metaphorical, inadequately attributed either to boxers’ life-and-death experiences in the ring or to repeatedly concussive head trauma that undermines their cognitive ability to gauge danger sufficiently. He suggests that serenity is a state of being possessed by those who ‘understand the futilities of worries and strife’, and that boxers possess serenity ‘to a greater degree than ordinary people’ (Wiley 1989, 1). Understood this way, the term is inapt: serenity implies a kind of peacefulness and state of being at one with the world that is surely the opposite of pugilistic selfhood, which, as we have seen, demands daily striving, resilience, and self-imposed constraints in contexts of physical and structural violence and strife. Pace Wiley, boxers may exhibit many dispositions, but serenity is almost certainly not one of them.

On the contrary, boxer cool is *hot*—a culturally derived repertoire of looks, stances and gestures acquired over time, crucial to navigating lived structural and physical violence, and decisive for managing the seething frustration and reifying indignation resulting from such violence. In boxer cool, elements, lessons, and know-how from the world of ‘the hood’ are recalibrated and effectively redeployed in the context of training and competing in the sport. Boxer cool is thus derivative of a milieu where individuals must learn to self-manage the complex emotional states and potential conflicts continually emergent in the

physical and structural violence endemic to their daily life. Boxer cool, in other words, finds its immediate origins not primarily in the gym or ring but in the necessary cultivation of sophisticated orientations, coping mechanisms, and practices of self-management in persistently dangerous and harmful contexts.

For cool is simultaneously noun, adjective, and verb in 'the hood'. It is a way-of-being and being-known—a bearing of self-mastery that demands to be recognized in urban locations of physical and structural disrespect and deprivation. In this regard, we should emphasize that cool is far more than an aesthetic; fundamentally, it is a street-level stance or cultural pose.² Inasmuch as it contains complexly embedded and embodied displays of self-possession and stored aggression, cool at once threatens, veils, and diffuses. Moreover, it plays an important role in staving off or resolving violent conflicts in controlled ways, as we shall see directly. Put differently, in contexts where struggles for status and respect are especially acute, cool is a currency—a kind of cultural capital in the form of a look or posture or comportment—the value of which resides in its power to ward off potential threats, manage fear, command respect, and regulate the temperature, as it were, of street-level confrontations and disputes. In fact, having the right look or adopting the appropriate orientations at the right times and in the right ways—being cool and getting cool with others—is crucial to getting on in a world of physical and structural violence.

Hence, properly understood, boxer cool is part of a broader urban cultural code—what Elijah Anderson (1999) has called the 'code of the street'. Most generally, in his ethnographic study of Philadelphia, Anderson argues that this 'street code' consists of the unwritten rules (norms) of comportment that loosely govern struggles for respect and status in 'the ghetto'. Or, as he puts the matter: 'At the heart of the code is the issue of respect—loosely defined as being treated "right" or being granted one's "props" (or proper due) or the deference one deserves' (Anderson 1999, 33). Put briefly: Anderson's research demonstrates how the code of the street constrains (and enables) the many ways in which respect is negotiated and (re)produced among 'ghetto' residents.

In doing so, his work provides a rich ethnographic resource for fleshing out a conception of boxer cool and, indeed, the affinities between urban cultural practices and the sport of boxing proper. To be sure, Anderson draws no connection between the code of the street and anything akin to 'boxer cool'—or the sport of boxing, for that matter—but his account of the 'social meaning of fighting'

(Anderson 1999, 69) is immediately relevant for any study of the intersection of urban culture and the sport of boxing.

Indeed, in the following passage, devoted to the description of a confrontation between Tyree and Malik (two young residents of South Philadelphia), cool (understood as part of a street code) and boxing begin to congeal in the fistic but controlled resolution of a slight Tyree perceives as the two of them flirt with some local young women:

‘Say, man. ... You always dissin’ me. I’m tired of yo’ shit, man’, says Tyree.

‘Aw, man. I didn’t do nothin’, responds Malik.

‘Yes you did....I’m tired of yo’ shit. Put up yo’ hands, man. Put up you’ hands’, challenges Tyree.

‘Aw, man, I don’t wanta fight you, man’, responds Malik.

‘Naw, man. I ain’t bullshittin’. Put up yo’ hands’, presses Tyree. The two men walk behind the building where they are standing and begin to square off. Almost on cue, the two friends put up their hands in the fighting position ... Tyree and Malik have agreed to a contest that is somewhere between a fair fight and a real fight. ... Such fights are characterized by elaborate rules, including ‘no hitting in the face’, ‘you got to use just your hands’, and ‘no double-teaming’ ... Malik and Tyree dance and spar, huffing and puffing, dodging and feinting. To the onlooker, it appears to be a game, for real blows seem hardly to be exchanged. But suddenly Malik lands a blow to Tyree’s shoulder and another to his stomach...dropping his guard, Tyree acknowledges this, but then quickly resumes his fighting stance ... they go at it again, punching, dancing, dodging. Tyree lands a good punch to Malik’s stomach and then, with a right cross, catches him on the chest, but Malik counters with a kidney punch and a knee to the crotch. Tyree checks his opponent with, ‘Watch that shit, man’ ... Tyree, hands up, accidentally lands an open hand to Malik’s face with the sound of a slap. Tyree knows...that he has violated the rules of the fair fight, and just as quickly he says, ‘Aw, ‘cuse me, man’ ... Malik responds, ‘Watch yourself, man. Watch yourself’.

They continue their dancing and sparring for about 20 minutes and then stop. They have fought and, for the moment, settled their differences. But, actually, something much more profound has occurred as well...Through this little fight...they have tested each

other's mettle, discerned important limits, and gained an abiding sense of what each one will 'take' from the other. With this in mind they adjust their behavior in each other's presence, giving the other his 'props', or respect...*Essentially, this is what it means to 'get cool' with someone...*(Anderson 1999, 89–91, emphasis added)

There are, to be sure, many things to note in the above ethnographic excerpt. But three aspects are of particular interest in the present context. The first thing to stress is that the dispute centers not on money or drugs or clothes but rather on *disrespect*. Tyree perceives that he has been 'dissed' by Malik in a way that has negative implications for his store of symbolic capital (status) and personal estimation (recognition). Second although a physical confrontation is immanent and seemingly unavoidable, the two do not resort to violence willy-nilly. Instead, in a seemingly effortless display of self-mastery (almost 'on cue', as Anderson says), the two reflexively calibrate and channel the heat of their conflict through an elaborately articulated kind of proto-sparring session. Third, and finally, while we would not go so far as to call this an engagement in the *sport* of boxing—or even boxing *training*—the live combat is in fact clearly informed by constitutive (if emergent) rules and flexible constraints that enable and limit the level and kind of violence that may be used here.

Tyree and Malik do not find themselves in a 'play' boxing match. Their 'fight' is both real and symbolic—it is a culturally mitigated form of violence coded in ways that 'to the onlooker' make it appear to be 'a game', as Anderson notes. But this is not chess or checkers; nor is it mere dramatic artifice. The stakes are high and the failure to restore an equilibrium of status and respect between Tyree and Malik could prove fatal. To avoid such a fate, each must refrain from 'going off' (losing self-control) and instead maintain the self-mastery of something akin to pugilistic nonchalance—as Tyree tellingly does in boxer-like style when he drops his guard to acknowledge (and thereby dismiss) the effects of a cleanly landed combination. Such high stakes nonchalance must be preserved even (especially) when, in the absence of a referee, the two youths mutually remind and correct one another about the inadmissibility of 'rule violations', such as when Malik lands a low blow or Tyree face-slaps Malik.

Now, in the broadest of terms, for our purposes here the significance of all this is twofold. At the cultural level, the fight between Tyree and Malik makes explicit how struggles for status and respect in the urban milieu are often informed by an epistemology of cool that feeds, albeit in modified form, into the sport of boxing. Tyree and Malik are not

boxers, to be sure, but in their confrontation with one another we see key features and functions of boxer cool come into sharp focus. At the structural level, the fight itself can and should in many ways be read as a cultural precursor to some of what goes on in an actual boxing gym, particularly during sparring sessions.³ Though their fight is oriented explicitly toward cultural ends (respect and status) rather than athletic ones (excellence and victory), structurally speaking the contest between Tyree and Malik nevertheless has profound parallels with the kind of pugilistic nonchalance one sees in contemporary combat sports. Indeed, the proximity between the fistic way in which they resolve their dispute and ‘get cool’ with one another and elements of the sport of boxing is unmistakable.

The sketch of pugilistic nonchalance developed here is of course not designed to characterize all boxers—or, indeed, anything like the necessary cultural conditions to becoming a boxer. There are, of course, many cultural pathways into the sport, none of which is essential. Yet boxer cool is a form of urban culture athletically sublimated in ways one does not see in many other sports. The concept of boxer cool aims to capture the complex interplay of culture and sport specifically in urban contexts where physical and structural violence pervade daily life. Elaborating a conception of boxer cool provides the makings of a culturally informed (but not reductive) explanation for how and why some individuals, through culturally informed reflexive practices of self-mastery, are oriented to and able to navigate the threats of danger and harm peculiar to pugilism.

Moreover, when considered alongside the notion of pugilistic selfhood outlined previously, the conception of boxer cool presented here also helps to explain the gap between (often subpar) athleticism and persistence in the sport of professional boxing. For individuals who persist in the gym and manage to become pro boxers are, as I saw firsthand at Authentic Boxing, often not the best athletes. Instead, those that make it are highly reflexive *street code adapters*. They successfully reconfigure and rehabilitate cool—thus internalizing Coach Edgar’s reproach that the gym ‘ain’t no ghetto’—not by rejecting the lessons of ‘the hood’ but by modifying and redeploying their knowledge of the code of the street within the confines of a most perilous athletic endeavor.

Notes

- 1 In other words, in the case of boxing, especially, there is a profound cultural dimension to what Russell (2005) has aptly characterized as the value of ‘self-affirmation’ peculiar to dangerous sport.

- 2 For an explicit discussion of cool and masculine culture in African–American contexts, see especially Majors and Billson (1992) and Hooks (2004). And for a related discussion in the context of British boxing, see especially Woodward (2004, 2007). In the present context, we must emphasize that while boxer cool may typically be gendered ‘masculine’, it is not necessarily or in any determinative way thusly gendered. Female residents of difficult urban contexts, not unlike and perhaps even more so than their male counterparts, must develop a repertoire of practical orientations vis-à-vis violence (both physical and structural) and do indeed redeploy those orientations in the sport of boxing, as I saw Franchesca and other female boxers at Authentic do repeatedly.
- 3 The subject of sparring is one to which we shall return in some detail in the second part of this study.

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