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Make me a better runner: boxing (part 6)

The sixth blog in our new series, in which we guinea pig ourselves trying training programmes and workouts from different sports to see which ones can help your running. This week we explain how Kerry developed greater mental strength through boxing, and how it can translate to results on the run.

by Kerry McCarthy, RW Commissioning Editor



THE POWER OF THE MIND

Growing up in Manchester, I got in a few scrapes as a teenager and have been smacked in the face a few times (in fact some days I'm sure my colleagues at RW Towers would like to add a few more to that record), but that rather potted pugilistic history was no preparation at all for getting bashed in the boxing ring.

When you first have a go at sparring you don't even see the punches coming. Then you progress to seeing them coming but not being able to get out of the way. It's like everything is happening in slow motion, Matrix-style. Except I'm not Neo and I couldn't halt the opponent's glove millimetres from my face and say, calmly: 'No.'

But by the time I finished my eight week Boxing For Runners course with former world number 3 bantamweight Cathy Brown I found myself reflecting on how I now welcomed the odd (ok more than odd) punch on the schnozzle and how little I cared that it was happening. Gone were the flinches, the whimpers, and the desperate backtracking, to be replaced with, at the halfway point, a mental shrug of acceptance and in the latter days, a grin of acknowledgement that I'd been caught and a resolution that the other guy was going to get some back to make up for it.

In short; I'd toughened up mentally. Ask anyone: 'would you like to be hit in the face repeatedly?' and, unless they have a loyalty card for their local S&M dungeon, the answer's probably: 'not bloody likely thanks.' But you know, once the worst has happened it takes a weight off your shoulders, you relax and that's when you start to reap the benefit.

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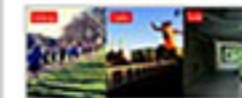
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Here's Cathy's take on it:

'Everyone has a mental place they go to when they hit hard times on long runs or when trying to motivate themselves to get training,' she says. 'So it's important to practise fine-tuning a way to hone in to a strong place in your mind outside of the running arena where you become comfortable outside your comfort zone - so that when it comes to running (your comfortable place), hitting walls will seem like a walk in the park.'

'Boxing sparring is a great way to find a mental place you have never been before. I put Kerry in the ring to spar after only a week of training as opposed to the standard few months of pad training first. He got walloped but I kept putting him in the ring and each subsequent time he got hit less and did more of the hitting. And when he did get caught it didn't phase him. He went to some dark places mentally during this process but it's only by being there that you are able to train yourself to pull out of them. All mental skills learned in any sport are transferable to another sport, and it's the same with running.'

Cathy is 100% right about the transferability. On my weekly runs during the programme, I found myself getting a lot better at pushing through the discomfort. I'd essentially be doing a long Sunday run of between 8 and 14 miles but doing it at tempo pace - which most of you will know is not easy at all. Some time after halfway my legs would be screaming but instead of easing off and thinking 'it's not happening today - I'll leave it for another time,' as I would have done previously, I pushed on feeling confident that my brain was trying to trick me and that I had more than enough to get through. And so it proved.

In other words, you discover that

- a) You're considerably tougher than you thought you were
- b) Your body has a lot more to give and
- c) Your brain can be trained to work with you and not against you at critical moments when you're up against it

The other part of this mental equation is about learning to be calm and analytical in stressful situations.

'This sounds counter-intuitive but sparring is a great way of teaching yourself to be calm in chaotic moments,' says Cathy (pictured getting smacked above). 'The calmer you are, the more clarity you have about the situation; the more stressed you are, the more angry you will become and therefore you will get more punches in the face.'

'This calmness is extremely beneficial to running as the more relaxed you are about a race both before and during it, the better you will perform. Learning to recognise that the challenge in front of you is not insurmountable and that you have the tools to cope with it is a key part of achieving sporting success. Runners tend to spend months and months training their bodies but time and again are let down mentally when it matters because they've not put the same amount of training in there.'

'Running is (apart from relay races) a solo sport and one of the great things about that is there is nobody to blame when it goes wrong and nobody to share the glory with when it goes right. Channelling the untapped mental strength and guts which each of us has will ensure that you'll be ticking the 'good day at the office' column far more often than not.'

Kerry trained with Cathy at [The Third Space Gym](#)

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