Politicians and media defend child boxing tournament in Australia

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The Australian Amateur Boxing League held a tournament on the Gold Coast in Queensland late last year where children of both sexes as young as nine were put into the ring and egged on to batter each other about the head for the entertainment of the paying audience.

Tiara Kelly, 14, knocked her opponent Latoya Bolt off her feet during their bout in the 42 kilogram division. In other bouts, boys just nine years old and weighing as little as 25 kilograms fought each other. Competing in her first boxing bout, Veronica Cameron, 12, became distraught and was on the verge of tears when confronted with the brute fact that boxing meant someone hitting you--hard.

News of the event was splashed in the newspapers the next day, sparking public outrage over the exploitation of children in boxing bouts.

But what is striking about the debate that followed was the response of the Australian and state governments and the mass media. The federal Sports Minister Jackie Kelly, along with her counterparts in all states, except NSW, opposed any new legislation outlawing child boxing. In NSW, the government proposed a ban, but only on children under the age of 14. The law would not stop younger children from training as boxers, sparring in gyms, or participating in tournaments in other states.

These governments were defending definite material interests. Amateur boxing is the recruiting ground for the professional boxing industry where billions of dollars are at stake in promotion, media coverage and associated gambling. At the highest level, heavyweight boxers like Mike Tyson earn tens of millions of dollars for a single bout. The fight promoters make many times that figure and the television networks rake in hundreds of millions more for screening the spectacle.

There were also other concerns. In the aftermath of the Atlanta Olympics in 1996, the Australian sporting chiefs drew the conclusion that it was necessary to launch a nation-wide campaign to encourage as many youth as possible to train in a particular sport with the goal of competing in the Sydney 2000 Olympics. A large pool of competitors of all ages was necessary to ensure the targets of gold medals in each sport will be met. Adverse publicity exposing the involvement of children threatened to upset the Olympic juggernaut in boxing and other sports.

Intense pressure is brought to bear on children by the media and often by their parents to aggressively train and compete in various sports and "Go for Gold". It is no accident that when a newspaper journalist asked nine-year-old Shannon Lindsay why he was training to be a boxer, he replied: "It's good to start young if you want to go for gold". Every day, sporting feats are idolised in the media and sport stars are held up as models for young people to follow. The illusion is promoted that youth, particularly in working class areas, will be able to win the same fame and fortune as the top sports men and women.

A media chorus joined the sports ministers in staunchly defending child boxing, claiming that adequate safeguards and precautions were taken. An editorial in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, entitled the "Manly Art," opposed the NSW government's limited legislation against child boxing in the following terms:

"There are two arguments in favour of the [NSW] State Government's decision to ban competitive boxing by children under fourteen years of age; one, that it is a dangerous sport, and two, that it is barbaric. Neither argument is compelling. Obviously, boxing involves health risks, but then so do all contact sports as well as those such as bicycling and surfing. Whether boxing is more dangerous than other sports because skill is judged largely on a contestant's ability to land blows to the head of an opponent is debatable. And often, this debate confuses professional boxing (where injuries and even death do occur) with amateur boxing (which has better safeguards from injury, tighter regulation and the requirement that all competitors wear protective headgear)".

The argument misses one essential point: in amateur, as well as professional boxing, unlike any other sport, the object of the competition is to render one's opponent unconscious by repeated blows to the head and body. The number of knockouts, or technical knockouts in which the referee ends a fight because a boxer has been physically incapacitated, is the key to a fighter's reputation, and therefore, marketability.

Fighters are trained to inflict as much physical damage on their opponent as possible. Youth are taught from the beginning to punch straight and from the shoulder--as the saying goes a "good punch only travels six inches". These are the blows that score the most points in a contest and they are also the most damaging and potentially lethal.

In some countries, the bare fists of a professional boxer used outside the ring are legally considered to be a deadly weapon. A calculation of the forces involved in professional boxing reveals that the brain of a contestant is subjected to the equivalent of blows from a 12-pound wooden hammer travelling at speeds in excess of 30 kilometres per hour.

The only public opposition to child boxing has come from the Australian Medical Association (AMA), which calls for a ban on all boxing, and a series of immediate steps to tighten boxing controls. The organisation has accumulated much medical evidence to prove that boxing is a danger to the health of the participants, both in the short and long term.

A British Medical Association (BMA) report, based on a review of 20 new research papers, particularly on amateur boxing, states that there is now enough evidence for a public inquiry to ban all boxing. "We knew when Joseph Stricklan, a 15-year-old British amateur, was killed in his second fight that if anyone throes a punch hard enough it can kill," BMA official Dr Geffrey Cundy said. The report includes evidence based on using more sensitive techniques such as Magnetic Resonance Imaging and neuropsychometric testing showing that not only is there immediate brain damage after a bout but also an accumulation of damage that can continue for 20 years after the boxer retires.

Head impacts cause alteration in the brain's blood flow. A controlled study of 34 active amateur boxers published in 1995 showed that non-boxing sportsmen had fewer aberrations in cerebral blood perfusion or SPECT scanning than in young amateur sportsmen who box. Non-boxers also showed better performance in a battery of neuropsychological tests.

The long-term effects of reductions in brain blood flow are not yet known.

The claim that adequate controls and headgear make boxing safe is also invalid. A paper released by J. Pearn from the Department of Paediatric and Child Health, at the Brisbane Royal Children's Hospital, concludes that repeated minor blows cause cumulative neurological damage: "Although the neuropsychiatric effects of repeated head blows in the amateur ranks are trivial in the short term, there is persuasive evidence that such damage is progressive.

"Dramatic neuropathological changes have been described at an autopsy of a 23-year-old boxer who had been boxing since he was 11 years of age and who did not appear to be clinically impaired. Such damage occurs amongst amateurs, and is directly related to the extent of exposure. The pathology is due to repeated microvascular injury and contusional injury of small but multifocal extent. Not surprisingly, this results in neuronal degeneration and neurofibrillary tangles and is cumulative. This potential outcome is one of the key issues which necessitates a ban on child boxing".

In addition to the risk of brain damage, doctors also point to other dangers including: haemorrhage into the anterior eye chamber, permanent eye pupil enlargement, bleeding into the structures at the back of the eyeball, and retinal detachment.

Other injuries common in boxing are ruptured eardrums, fractures to the nose and jaw, including teeth, damage to the external ear, and possible renal damage.

Amateur boxing groups defend themselves by claiming that the number of injuries is much lower than in other sports. But such claims involve a rather cynical abuse of statistics--the number of injuries tells us nothing about the rate of injuries or the type of injuries. The number of young people engaged in boxing is far lower than in contact sports like football, rugby league or soccer.

In the final analysis, the defenders of boxing, by children or adults, rest on claims that this barbaric sport builds character and moral fibre. According to the *Sydney Morning Herald* editorial: "It is the focus on personal development that helped boxing earn its reputation as the 'manly art of self-defence'. The term conjures up not only the possession of physical skills and discipline, but also the cultivation of self-confidence, a sense of independence and a healthy respect for others. Boxing may not be the only way to develop those qualities. But for many people, it remains a preferable alternative to learning life skills sitting in front of the television set or computer screen".

It is difficult to imagine more twisted logic. A boxer enters the ring with the aim of outscoring his opponent by landing more blows to the body and head, and, hopefully, knocking him, or her, out. How this is meant to develop character is a question that is never answered.

One is tempted to call on the writer of the editorial, who is probably more familiar with a computer screen than the interior of a boxing ring, to take up "the manly art" and then maybe he, or she, would develop a healthier respect for the damaging qualities of gloved fists.

Among working people there is a strong feeling that children should be taught to "look after themselves" and some defend boxing on that basis. It is certainly true that young people, and the working class generally, need to be able to defend themselves. But it is one thing to learn the art of self-defence, and quite another to put two people into a ring to batter each other for the enjoyment of an audience. Furthermore any positive benefits from boxing can be engendered just as readily in other forms of self-defence--without the inevitable physical damage.

The origins of the so-called "manly art" are revealing. Boxing began in ancient Greece and Rome as part of games aimed at testing the strength and endurance of young men, particularly in activities related to the military. Later, wealthy men trained their slaves as boxers and had them perform for special entertainments. The Romans forced their cestus-clad (metal-studded leather strapping) slaves to bludgeon one another to death in a gruesome perversion of sport--for crowds who came to see the killing.

Modern boxing developed with the rise of capitalism in the 18th and 19th centuries out of the bare knuckle prize fighting contests staged by promoters, particularly in Britain. London became a major city for such fights, in which entrepreneurs put up a purse for the winner and made money by betting on the outcome. Bare knuckle bouts involved no rules at all--the winner was determined by beating an opponent by any means until he was unconscious or incapable of standing. Leather gloves were introduced during this period, not as a means of protecting the head but to prevent damage to the hands of the boxers.

But by the middle of last century, promoters recognised the need to clean up the image of boxing if the matches were to attract a broader and wealthier audience. As the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* states, "The brawling which distinguished old-time pugilism continued to alienate most of the better people of England and it became apparent that if a widely popular sport was to emerge and endure it would have to be extracted from, rather than preserved in, the hurly burly of prize fighting."

In 1867, the Eighth Marquess of Queensberry, John Sholto Douglas, lent his name, and therefore an association with the British aristocracy, to a set of rules drawn up by John Chambers of the Amateur Athletic Club--thus the name "Queensberry Rules," which eventually predominated over the earlier "London Rules" and became the framework for modern boxing today.

In all honesty, after reviewing the history of the sport, it is hard for anyone to assert that boxing has progressed. Since 1945, there have been 361 deaths in the ring. The figure does not include the countless thousands whose lives have been destroyed by the beatings they have received in boxing bouts or those who suffer irreparable brain damage.

Just last month, the professional boxer Gerry Quarry, aged 53, died of pneumonia brought on by dementia from which he had suffered for 14 years. Quarry, who twice fought for the world heavyweight title, earned $US2.1 million during his career, but finished up living on social security cheques. Out of money and already showing signs of blunt force trauma, Quarry returned to the ring in October 1992, believing he could make a comeback. He took a belting in Colorado, a state where no boxing licence is required. He was paid $US1,050.

The fact that politicians and the media, with virtually no exception, have come to the unabashed defence of boxing, for children as well as adults, is a symptom of a diseased society. The final word should go to the American socialist leader James P. Cannon who wrote a series of biting articles in 1951 on the death of the 20-year-old prize fighter Georgie Flores in the ring at Madison Square Garden in New York.

"It is a commentary on the times and the social environment out of which the boxing business rises like a poisonous flower from the dunghill, that nobody came forward with the simple demand to outlaw prize fighting, as it was outlawed in most of the states of this country up till the turn of the century. Cock-fighting is illegal; it is considered inhumane to put a couple of roosters in the pit and incite them to spur each other until one of them keels over. It is also against the law to put bulldogs into the pit to fight for a side bet. But our civilisation--which is on the march, to be sure--has not yet advanced to the point where law and public opinion forbid men, who have nothing against each other, to fight for money and the amusement of paying spectators. Such spectacles are a part of our highly touted way of life."