

### **The Sweet Science: The Story of NBS Gym**

When talking to an assortment of individuals concerning their views upon boxing, there were certain terms that continued to pop up in my sample. The first and most intriguing of these terms was “hyper-masculinity” and the second was “aggression.” What makes this first term “hyper-masculinity” so interesting is that in my gym of interest, the NBS Boxing gym, the top trainers themselves are female, Mandy and Amy. In general, boxing considered a sport of men. To the more critical individual boxing is considered a sport of barbarism because the end result is a fight. But to the boxing purist, the sport is more of a science. The goal is to hit and to not be hit. This notion transcends styles, gender, and fighters. My goal in working on such a project and producing a correspondent film is to deconstruct the notion boxing and the stereotype of who is and who is not a fighter.

As mentioned previously, the focus of my project is the NBS Boxing gym in Raleigh, North Carolina. In this gym things operate much differently from the arrangement of the stereotypical boxing gym. For one, the gym is not just intended for boxing and is not used for just the boxers. The NBS Gym has fencing, Muay Thai fighting, and mixed martial arts to add to its repertoire. But beyond the actual focus of the gym, its atmosphere is also different from the stereotypes that surround boxing. Confronting these stereotypes that surround the sport of boxing were the primary focus of my work. The world of professional boxing is littered with a supposed era of glitz, glamour, and arrogance on the part of the prizefighters, and corruption and greed on the business side of the operation. The result of this

perception is that boxing, has faded from its prominence in the early and mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, to almost an afterthought in the conversation of major 21<sup>st</sup> century sports.

Placing myself in reference to the subject area of this project, my intentional goals were very much self-serving in my thought process for the layout of my work. Never having the opportunity to box for myself, I have always been a fight fan. I have always been enamored with the mystique of the historic greats Muhammad Ali, Joe Louis and Thomas Hearn's, and I've been inundated with the brutal stories of Mike Tyson and Tommy Morrison. My history with the sport of boxing, and my history as a high-school athlete and life-long competitor pushed me to pursue a project that I intended to use to be almost a love story for the sport. Despite the constant goal to maintain objectivity in one's documentary work, my early goals for the project had a specific agenda. Because along with the goals that I had for my documentary work, I brought in with me, many of the same stereotypical standards of boxing that I described previously. I brought with me a certain expectation of what I wanted to see from the gym. Both the preconceived expectations and project goals would be quickly thwarted by the actuality of the people I would meet and the relationships that I would build with them.

During my first visit to NBS, I went without my camera, as I have become accustomed to doing in my previous documentary work. I wanted the opportunity to meet with the trainers and present myself to truly reach a level of access that would be conducive to assembling a strong film. My anticipation of this meeting would fall prey to the same genre of thinking that developed in my sample. I, just as the individuals in my sample, made the assumption that the fighters and trainers in

the gym would be male. That is what I have become accustomed to and that was what I had prepared for. My initial line of contact with the gym had occurred via email, so when I was first introduced to Amy, my initial presumption was that she was just a worker at the gym. Once I arrived at the facilities, I was introduced to a white woman very similar in height to myself, and very much non-physically intimidating. The same night I was introduced to Mandy as well, a woman, younger than Amy who held a similar build. These descriptions of Mandy and Amy are so crucial to the storyline development of this story because my focus becomes a battle of perceptions. The perceptions of what boxing is as a sport, the perceptions of who can engage in boxing, and the perceptions of what it means to be a fighter.

I was introduced to Amy, one of the primary trainers at the gym who had been working there for a number of years. Right after meeting her, I was introduced to Mandy, the co-trainer of the boxers who had begun working as fighter trained by Mandy and after she finished her amateur fighting career she transitioned to coaching and training the fighters at the gym. In simple conversation I was able to find that Mandy was much more animated and willing to talk than was Amy. Without much or any probing Mandy began to go on about her experience coaching. She began to talk about her amazement at being paid to do something that she loves, and to wake up and work with these people and personalities that she enjoyed. Once I did meet the fighters, much of what I saw was contrary to the perceptions that I had developed into expectations for the project. Most of the fighters that I saw that day were white, including Mandy and Amy. What I had prepared myself for was a gym that would consist primarily of African American and Latino fighters, in that

environment my race would serve as my shield as the outsider, it would serve as my invisibility cloak to blend into my environment. Once I could no longer use race as the primary indicator that I was one with my environment, I felt the need to emphasize my own history in combative sports, which including wrestling and martial arts. I felt the need to assert my competitive nature in order to assert that I was, in fact, one of the guys rather than a Duke student who got his hands on a camera and decided to intrude upon their boxing gym and in their domain.

Some of the more interesting characters that I met that day are individuals who we see throughout the film. Chris Lewter, a mixed martial arts fighter/boxer was by and far the most outgoing person that I came across. Lewter, as he is most often referred to as, appears to fit the “mold” as one would say, of a mixed martial arts fighter. He is a white male tattooed up from his chin down to his legs and everywhere in between. But in talking to him, I learned that there was goofiness about him, not at all in a pejorative way that took away the edge of his appearance. In subsequent visits, I learned of his previous mixed martial arts fight in which he was taken down and elbow smashed in the face pretty badly until the point that the fight was stopped. He told me about that defeat himself, no probing, no prodding, but in mentioning so, he made no hesitation to let me know that he went to the guy and requested a rematch. Lewter wanted to let me know that he was a competitor, just as I wanted to show him that I was the same.

Outside of Lewter, I was also introduced to both Ricky and TJ. Ricky is a tall and lanky fighter about my age at the gym. Much more calm and reserved than Lewter he more than almost anyone else was very much aware of my presence and

of my role as an outsider. Even before I brought the camera with me, during my first visit, Ricky wanted to ask me what my vision was for the film and what I was attempting to create. Similar sentiments were shared by T.J., another young fighter in the gym. TJ, a junior in high school was very suspicious of my presence around the gym. Though not to the point that he refused to talk to me, but it was very obvious that he remained guarded around me with or without my camera. But what remains interesting about both Ricky and TJ is that of all of the younger boxers in the gym (Lewter excluded) they seemed to be the most accomplished and the most talented. TJ has been training in the gym for the past three years and has developed a very strong relationship with Mandy. She will let it be known without much pushing that TJ has become a part of her life since she has been working with him just as she has become a part of his life. Though the relationship between the trainers and Ricky seems very much to be strong, the bond as it relates to TJ is noticeable.

On my first visit to the gym with my camera, I came in film an invitational tourney. There were a collection of boxers from schools in Carolina and those further away. Because of the absence of a ring doctor, the fights were not officially counted towards the fighters' amateur records. Contrary to what I had expected, the tournament seemed to be very much like a NCAA tournament as all of the fighters, except those from NBS, were on a school team. The schools involved included The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, East Carolina University, and the University of Maryland College Park.

The tournament itself was very exciting with three fights resulting in knockouts and the school-based rivalries added to the intensity of the event. Only two of the NBS fighters were involved in the Saturday tournament, they were Ricky and TJ. Ricky was the first of the two to fight that day and he did well. Though there was no official decision because of the lack of a ring doctor, Ricky was able to use his length to dictate the tempo and the spacing of the fight and for all intensive purposes it seemed as if he came out on top in his fight. TJ's fight was the last of the tournament and again though there was no official decision there was little question that he controlled the fight and would have won a decision if it had gone to the scorecards. This tournament served as a measuring stick for the fighters and the progress that they have made in their training versus outside fighters under school sanctioned programs. But more importantly, for my project it served as the proving ground for a lesson that Mandy would teach in terms of perception in the sport of boxing.

In our preliminary conversations, Mandy and I discussed my hometown of Baltimore, Maryland. We talked about a previous documentary that I had worked on concerning boxers from that area and she recalled vividly, a tournament that NBS had in that area. In telling her story, Mandy recounted the quote on quote "toughness" of the guys that came from that area. The fighters looked as if they had the killer instinct and were prepared for war. Mandy also talked about the perceptions of NBS once they would walk into a tournament. She spoke about how when people would see walk in with two white female trainers, it functioned as a signifier that the fighters themselves would be easy. Mandy also mentioned that TJ's

appearance did nothing to quell those thoughts either. She would go on about TJ looking like a “nerdy white guy” made the other fighter think that he would serve as an easy win, but to the contrary once they got in the ring and felt first hand his ability, those perceptions changed rapidly.

I think that Mandy would use the conversation about how geeky TJ was or how many people that would question whether or not she and Amy knew anything about boxing in order to show how futile these perceptions were. Mandy really reveled in the fact that people didn't think that she and Amy knew much about boxing. I feel that the fact that she could hold that chip on her shoulder was something that she and Amy used as motivation to push their fighters forward. Though Amy does come forward and say that the fact that women have been fighting for a number of years and that it has mainly become something that has just been accepted, she does make sure that she mentions there are some men who still hold doubts about the fact that they can learn something from a woman in regard to boxing. Mandy holds many of the same sentiments but it is clear that her age shows use that she still has not become quite as accustomed to the stereotypes that concern women in boxing as Amy has been accustomed.

But this issue of women in boxing is an important topic that I think and believe deserves further discussion. The first point of importance is that I didn't want to force this issue as a formal thesis of my film. I didn't think that the film needed to be the story of women fighting against the stereotypical male chauvinistic sport of boxing. I wanted the film to be truly more organic. When talking to Amy and when talking to Mandy, they mentioned the problems that come with being a female

trainer in boxing, with none being more important than the judgment that is passed onto the boxer as a result of the trainer's appearance. But the fact that both Amy and Mandy shrugged off these criticisms as a simple moment of ignorance, is something that I felt should be treated as such in the film. To push this agenda that Mandy and Amy focused 100% of their energy in coaching to silencing the doubters that question whether or not women can be active participants in boxing would not be true to the experience that I had at the gym. Mandy and Amy were active agents in the sport of boxing, no less than any man that engages in the sport and no more than anyone else. I did not want to treat that fact that they were female trainers with any more preferential favor than they treated the subject. Mandy and Amy said that people learn quickly that they know what they are talking about when it comes to the sport of boxing and I felt that placing on the pedestal that they were female trainers would detract from the active role that women play in boxing and the role that they have played in boxing for years.

One of the more interesting stories that I came across in my fieldwork in the NBS gym was the story of how Mandy came into boxing. It was one that was both enticing but at the same time, very much unexpected. Mandy told me that she started working in the gym after she had been working as the kitchen manager in a restaurant and she was forced to fire an employee. The employee, a male, returned to work later that night drunk and demanded his job back. When Mandy refused to give him his job back, he hit her and knocked her to the ground. She told me that she then got up and hit the guy back and she was later told to call the number for the



NBS gym, and that is how she got into boxing. The result of such was a ten-year career as a fighter and as a coach.

When describing her fighting, I began to learn more and more about the personality of Mandy as compared to that of Amy. Amy told me that she always had a fear before getting into the ring to fight. Much of this was influenced by her timid personality as a person. But, as she said, once she got in the ring the fear and tension left her and she was prepared to fight. To the contrary, Mandy told me that she always had a physical size advantage going into the ring to fight. She would look her opponents up and down and play mind games with them before the fight, slightly touching their gloves before the round would begin and topping it all off with a smile. It would throw off their mental game, as she would tell me, because they would not know what to expect with her actions. Though this story may seem somewhat outside of the realm of the fight, I thought it contributed to my overall understanding of Mandy as a person. Her actions in the ring were very much concurrent with her philosophy outside of it. Her philosophy, as she so eloquently put it was that people have to enjoy the moment and make sure they were having fun in the job that they were doing each day. She made the point that not everyone is built mentally to be a boxer and that those that were would not be able to do the sport for very long, so that it is important to live life without regrets.

Mandy went on further to describe the last fight of her career and she did this with particular earnest because it was the first fight that she had been scared of her opponent. The woman that she fought in a kickboxing match was actually in the military and had been requested to return to duty early. The woman thoroughly

beat Mandy and broke two of her ribs, but after the fight she went up to Mandy and thanked her for the opportunity to fight. She thanked her for giving her a chance to get her mind of what she was getting ready to get into.

It was in this interview, though it was not in the final cut of the film, that I truly saw the essence of all the work that I had done at NBS. Boxing as a sport has multiple faces. It has the professional face of which most people are aware. That is the face of Mike Tyson, the knock out phenom that transformed into a head case that was accused of rape. That is the face of the charismatic Muhammad Ali that was known as much for his cultural critique and significance as much as he was known as the greatest of all time. In contemporary boxing, the dominant figure is Floyd Mayweather, a brash talking fighter who is followed for his talent as much as he is followed because people want to see the controversy that follows him. In this professional realm, boxing is known for corruption and being the sport that used to be one of the national pastimes. But what we see from this story with Amy and Mandy especially is that boxing does not neatly fit into this singular and defined role. It has multiple levels, one being this professional scene, but the other being the amateur circuit. People engage in the sport of boxing for different reasons, with all of them not being the allure of the spotlight and the professional level. For Mandy, boxing served as an outlet after a traumatic event, for Amy, boxing was something that she always wanted to do and it provided her with a chance to challenge her fears and to challenge her innate timid personality.

Once I understood this, I found the direction that I wanted to take the final cut of my film. I wanted to draw the comparison between the images that we are

familiar with as a people as compared to the images that we see. When first viewing the film, I begin with the audio of a television interview with Mike Tyson when he is questioned about the rage that he brings in the ring during fights. His response is that since it is a fight anyway it doesn't matter. Not before long, Mike begins to lash out at the host and the opening sequence of my film begins. Here I again show famous images of Muhammad Ali, Mike Tyson, and Floyd Mayweather in the ring and I have with that the audio from some of their more famous quotes. The goal here is to draw upon the images that people have of boxing. I wanted to draw upon these perceptions and stereotypes of the sport in order to force greater thought when they see and hear the stories of the fighters at NBS gym.

We meet multiple characters throughout the film including those discussed previously, TJ and Ricky, but one of the most complex characters that we come across and I believe the greatest example of the alternate impact of boxing was Chris Lewter. Lewter, a mixed martial artist openly told me about his past use of drugs, his drinking and his overall partying ways. He said that he has now garnered a great level of respect from his coworkers at the company that he works for because of the way that he was matured. Chris broke it down for me that he has changed from a person that was very much willing and prepared to fight if someone were to look at him the wrong way, to a person that is much more disciplined. He almost seemed disappointed in the fact that he partied most of his life away based on the way that he used to live but continually looks forward to training and improving himself. Now Chris takes it as his charge to continue to inspire the younger guys such as the TJs and the Ricky's so that they do not stray away from boxing and that they hone the

God-given talents that they have. Chris does not pretend that he has completely gone away from his wild side as referenced by his multiple tattoos and open personality, but he comes forward and says that the discipline of boxing has mellowed him out. The reason why I feel that Lewter is such a great representation of what boxing can be outside of the scope of the professional realm is because it represents a discipline and a way to live life, not just a way to fight. It keeps you grounded because there is also so much more to learn, and it takes so much to be in tip top condition, and one has to put so much of himself into his trade so that he or she can stay on top. The same lessons that Lewter learns in boxing are the same lessons he has applied to his life so that he could mature to the point that he has matured. When one looks at boxing through this perspective, the effects and influence that it can have on one's life, your perception of the sport can thoroughly change. No longer do you just think of the controversy of Mike Tyson and the corruption of promoters, but of the stories of people that used boxing to improve themselves, not to seek attention or fortunes. The Mandy's of the world who fought after being confronted by an inebriated former employee, or the Amy's who use the sport to fight their own in timidity, or the Chris Lewter's who were able to calm down their lives of partying and wildness in order to become disciplined, respected, and also mentors to others. Once we look at boxing from these multiple perspectives, the stereotypical words that I first came across in my original sample won't come across so unanimously.

The words that I heard to describe the film following my work moved much further away from the stereotypes of professional boxing and touched much closer

to the individual stories of the amateur fighters. Some women said that after seeing these women fight they felt “empowered” to do the same. Or viewers came up to me to say that they were unaware that boxing could make such a “change” in people’s lives. This was the reaction that I was searching for through all of my work, to challenge the ideas that surround boxing and to question what we really know about the subject, and in this vein, I deem the work a success, because if nothing less, it promotes the conversation about what the sport truly means.

Looking at the project from the greater academic point of view of documentary studies, I do think there are a few points of interest that must be highlighted. The first of which is the dynamic of the camera. Because the presence of a camera automatically changes all that happens around you, my connection with certain characters in the film is catered toward that phenomenon. My interviews with Mandy, Chris Lewter and Bruce were able to go into more depth because they were the least influenced by the presence of the camera, it did not take away from what they wanted to say to me. A viewer once asked me what was the single most important thing that I would take away from my project and my answer to that question equates to my philosophy concerning documentary studies as a whole. In any documentary work, the opportunity to build relationships and to tell stories that my have not been told otherwise is always the most important part of the filmmaking process. I have talked about the impact that the camera can have on one’s subject and how it can change the dynamic between the filmmaker and the subject, but for me, the chance to build relationships with individuals despite my agency as a filmmaker remains remarkable. My work with Chris Lewter, my work

with Mandy, in that I felt that I had the opportunity to get to know these individuals and connect with them as well as tell a part of their story. Without my project and without this work, our paths may have never crossed but it is through documentary studies that these bridges are built between communities.

Historically, the question of the stranger with a camera always comes into question. Can an outsider come into a community and adequately tell the story of its inhabitants? Can a student go inside of a boxing gym and adequately tell the story of boxing and of a boxing gym though he himself does not fight? This is the secondary question that I am faced with throughout my work. I, myself, am not a part of the boxing community. I don't know boxing. I am a fan of professional boxing, but how does that give me agency to truly tell this story? These are the competing ideals that I must always come to terms with during my work. But my answer to this question through my work has always been is that my film does not have the job to tell the story of the NBS boxing gym, my job is to build relationships and to document my experience in doing so. The fact that my film promotes conversation about the topic of boxing and gives these individuals a chance to talk on their own experiences does enough. The true storytelling that occurs in documentary work is the passing on of stories from one community to another, whether that be subject to filmmaker or film to audience. In the end, everyone gains from learning of the experiences of others and the fact that it promotes further conversation is the true value of the academic work. After the *Sweet Science* I have decided that it will be my charge to pick up the sport of boxing following graduation because I feel that it can assist me in disciplining myself in certain areas of my life where I feel I can be stronger. I have

also been told by others that they are now motivated to begin their work in the sport of boxing. The transfer of stories, the transfer of thoughts, fears, and ideas are all aspects of documentary studies that are unwritten and that can be truly immeasurable. But for all of the academia that surrounds the process of filmmaking, and the details of journalism that all are present in documentary studies, there is no detail as enriching about the work, or about *The Sweet Science*, than learning about the experiences of your fellow man.