

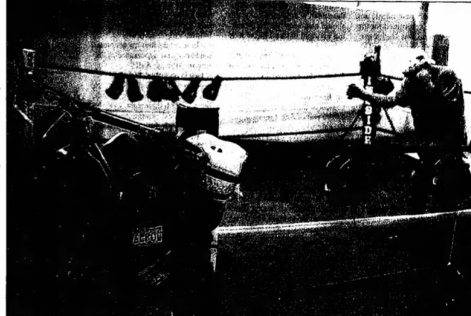
HERALD-ZEITUNG
SPORTS

Friday
July 23, 1999
1B

A TEN ROUND INQUIRY

Seeking the Sweet Science

Are the answers to life's mysteries found inside the square circle?



PETER BROWN/News-Online Darick Mendoza, 24, of Kyle shadow boxes at the 10 Count gym in San Marcos on Wednesday. Mendoza is one of a growing number of boxers training at the gym.

PETE BROWN

Superman fought for truth. It was first and foremost, before justice and the American way.

I cannot say the same for myself. As I examine the reasons that brought me from behind my drink and into the square circle, I find that I have not been fighting for truth, but rather because of it. There are many truths about myself that led me to the ring, some that I am hesitant to even face, let alone share.

I have never been a fighter. I am the youngest child in my family, and I have three older sisters. I learned early on that conflict was easily avoided, else ignored, by minding my own business. I have carried this with me, to both my benefit and detriment, into my adult life.

It has been a comfortable life, a blessed life. Though the two years of Peace Corps service I spent in provincial Russia were grueling, and at times violent, there was always the promise of my return to this country, to a place I understood, where conflict was not a part of my everyday life.

It was a foolish promise in which to believe. My return to this mass-producing, mass-consuming culture proved more difficult than my adjustment to Russian life. I found myself torn between two identities, negotiating an American landscape I no longer recognized, built on systems I no longer understood and, to be frank, filled with people for whom I no longer cared.

The Peace Corps calls this "reverse culture shock," but giving it a name does little. Time is the only cure. As I began to feel myself returning to some sort of normal, etching out a life that was informed by my experience, the Great October Flood destroyed my home and strengthened my spine. Pounds dropped away and my shoulders hunched as they do when I'm sick. It was as if my body tried to curl into itself, for protection and solitude.

Why am I sharing these things? Because I believe on levels I cannot fully comprehend, they brought me to the ring. Understanding why I took up study of the sweet science seemed to me as important as the boxing itself. And truth be told, the single, largest factor that led me to the ring was that a friend and fellow sportswriter told me he was undertaking the task and had somehow gotten himself involved in a charity sparring match. I was not long in his wake. I did not share any of these reasons

with Martin Ortiz, trainer and co-owner of 10-Count boxing gym in San Marcos the day I visited with him and learned about the boxing workout.

Rather, I told him, and this, also, is true, that I hoped training as a boxer would make me a better writer, if only when I covered the fights.

"I like the way you write now," Ortiz told me. "You write really, you know, 'flowery-aka.'"

Some fighter I'll turn out to be.

Round 1

The Workout
Each workout at the gym begins with stretching and a set of exercises that strengthen and stretch the arms and back. Most of these are done to a four-count rhythm, which is gym-speak for hiding the fact that instead of 20 jumping jacks, you are doing 80. There are arm rotations, cherry pickers, chain breakers and arm splices, stomach crunches, sit ups and butterfly kicks.

Robert "Longhanks" Martinez generally drives the duty for showing new people these exercises. Longhanks is 22 and has been training with Ortiz for three years. At the end of the first day, I plead, "Longhanks, you're killing me."

"You get used to it," he said. The workout will end with jumping rope for 12 minutes (four three-minute rounds with a minute of rest in between). Perhaps it is here more than anywhere else that the differences between the experienced fighters and the neophytes like myself are most evident. The fighters skip along, switch feet and cross arms at a fast, easy clip. They are laughing and talking to a steady whizz-whop sound from all of the ropes.

I, however, am tangled and turned, unable to get going. When I do, it is in a slow, kindergarten pace with double skips in between. I am a child again, an awkward, gangly child.

Round II

Boxing is ...
Ortiz has been training fighters for about 22 years. He is a level-two coach certified by USA Boxing, and before opening 10-Count earlier this year, he trained fighters in a barn-like building in his backyard in Buena Vista, where a rooster and dog greeted you as you arrived and inside a sign proclaimed: "The more you sweat in the gym, the less you bleed in the ring."

Boxing runs through Ortiz' family, but when he was just a boy, the man down the street paid him a quarter to spar with the man's son. Such was Ortiz' induction into the sport, and years later, serving in the Marines, he returned to it.

"Back then, if you won a fight, the Marines gave you the next day off," he said.

After four years in the Marines, Ortiz settled down and started his family. When his kids grew a bit older, they wanted to learn to box, and Ortiz has been training fighters ever since. "I'll love to do this forever," he said. "I love to teach it and watch people pick it up."

There is an easy rhythm with which he overcomes sparring. Nice job, nice job, don't drop the right hand, don't drop the right hand, he'll say. He has the ability to oversee a room full of boxers, calling out to one at the other end of the gym. Turn that right hand around. "It's commitment," Ortiz said of box-



PETER BROWN/News-Online Simon Sanchez wraps his hands prior to a workout on Wednesday. Sanchez, a lightweight, is hoping to earn an invitation to the Olympic trials in the coming months.

"Discipline, fear, those are there, but what boxing is, is commitment. In the old days, the first day you walk into the gym, they'll throw you in the ring and beat the heck out of you and see if you came back, see if you had heart. It's not like that anymore. You have to learn to crawl before you can walk, to ing."

See BOXING/2B

QUICK HITS

'Putt, Pitch and Drive' is Saturday

Sundance Golf Course will host the first annual Putt, Pitch and Drive Contest for Juniors on Saturday.

Just like the National Football League's Putt, Pass and Kick competition which has lasted 60 years, winners, in four age groups, keep advancing to higher tiers of competition.

The Sundance event is a first-tier contest. The final competition will be held October 21-24 in Orlando. The age categories are under 10, 10-12, 13-15, and 16-17.

Beginners, intermediate and advanced players are encouraged to compete. Entry forms can be obtained at Sundance Golf Course. The one-time entry fee is \$10.

Each participant will receive three Slazenger golf balls, valued at \$10.

For more information or to sign up for the contest, call Sundance at 629-2817.

Let suspension length undecided

DALLAS (AP) — The National Football League hasn't yet determined the length of Leon Lett's latest suspension for violating the NFL's substance-abuse policy, a league official said Thursday.

Lett was indefinitely suspended last month after another transgression landed him in the third stage of the league's drug and alcohol program.

Unlike his previous suspension, which automatically meant an entire season on the sidelines, the length of this suspension is ultimately up to commissioner Paul Tagliabue.

The Dallas Morning News, citing several sources involved in the process, reported Thursday that Tagliabue has told associates he is considering a four-game suspension.

League spokesman Greg Aiello refused Thursday to confirm or deny the report.

Some Stars veterans won't be back

IRVING (AP) — Pro-agent veterans Pat Verbeek and Craig Ludwig apparently won't return to help the Dallas Stars defend the Stanley Cup next season.

General manager Bob Gainey said the pair had been told they are not in the Stars' plan for next season and to seek offers from other teams.

The move is part of a restructuring geared toward making the aging Stars' roster younger. Seven members of the Stanley Cup champions won't be returning next season.

Dallas traded last week for 26-year-old defenseman Jamie Puuhor to replace the 38-year-old Ludwig. Verbeek, 35, had been bumped off the Stars' second line.

GAME TIME

► Today

Major League Baseball
San Diego at Houston,
7 p.m.

Texas League Baseball
Tulsa at San Antonio, 7 p.m.

Little League Baseball
State Softball
TBA

► Saturday

Major League Baseball
San Diego at Houston,
12:15 p.m.

Texas at Tampa Bay,
5:30 p.m.

Texas League Baseball
Tulsa at San Antonio, 7 p.m.

Little League Baseball
State Softball
TBA

Armstrong shooting for the moon in Tour de Lance

BORDEAUX, France (AP) — makes his triumphant run, the Lance Armstrong is right where he wants to be. He has left the mountains of the Pyrenees behind and is in control of the Tour de France in the Bordeaux vine country.

Victory in Paris on Sunday seems more certain with each passing day. He stayed safely in the pack on flat ground Thursday, finishing 51st but losing none of his commanding lead of 61 minutes, 15 seconds.

Now, the 27-year-old Texan who has overcome testicular cancer faces only a flat stage Friday and a time trial Saturday. Then comes the final ride up the Champs-Elysees. Along the countryside, as he

link between Lance Armstrong and Neil Armstrong did not go unnoticed. "Go Lance — Reach the Moon!" read a banner along the route, accompanied by an American flag.

The 17th stage was a 120-mile ride through pine forests and past vineyards. Belgium's Tom Strels was in a sprint for his third stage victory. It would have been his fourth if not for a disqualification in another stage for rough tactics.

Robbie McEwen of Australia was second and Erik Zabel of Germany was third. Stuart O'Grady of Australia was in position to contest the final sprint, but fell close to the finish. He was badly bruised but com-

LEADERS

Tour de France
Overall Standings
(After 17 stages)

1. Lance Armstrong, United States, 81 points, 63 hours, 28 minutes, 20 seconds.

2. Fernando Escobar, Spain, 76 points, 81 minutes, 15 seconds behind.

3. Alex Zülle, Switzerland, Germany, 73.

4. Miguel Indurain, Spain, 68.

5. Harold Vitorica, France, 67, 11:42.

pleted the race. Pavel Tonkov, the Russian who was in 11th place overall, quit the race because of the death of his father. Tonkov, the leader of Italy's Megaz team, is a former Tour de Italy winner.

The day got off to a strange

start when a labor dispute greeted the riders. Just three miles into the race, the cyclists were blocked by firemen protesting working conditions. "Angry firemen" said a banner. The race had to begin again.

Later, a number of riders found themselves wiping their eyes when a fan threw an unidentified substance onto the road that some said might have been pepper.

An eight-man group broke out after 28 miles and reached a lead of 7:55, before the pack started picking up speed and rolling them in. The group included two national champions, Germany's Ludo Bolts and Australia's Henk Vogels.

With almost nine miles left,

the pack was grouped again, and the sprinters jockeyed for position.

Armstrong was quiet Thursday, declining to speak at the post-race news conference.

A day earlier, he smiled when reminded by a TV interviewer of the link with Neil Armstrong — but otherwise expressed only anger and frustration with the continued drug accusations.

"They want me to crack on the bike — and I'm not going to," he said.

The French newspaper Le Monde had reported that traces of a corticosteroid were detected in his urine. Corticosteroids are anti-inflammatory and painkilling drugs that are not listed as steroids.

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BOXING/From 1B

learn to crawl before you can walk, to walk before you can run. That takes commitment.

"Boxing boils down to two men with nothing else," he said. "Two men and their fists. It's basic, primal. It's pure."

Mark Key, co-owner of the gym and amateur super-heavyweight, said the gym fills a niche for people who had the sort of commitment Ortiz demanded.

"A lot of people come in for a week or so, and disappear. You see how Martin works people out. You have to be committed for the workout. When I was 16, I drove around Austin looking for a place to learn to box," Key said.

The partners have long range plans that include building a base of pros to fight out of the gym and perhaps promoting on down the road. For now, Key said, the gym is making its rent and working to cover its expenses.

"It could take a while, but we'll find our niche," he said.

Round III

The job is the alpha and omega of boxing. It is a range finder and a set-up, a starting point from which combinations are launched and a way keep an opponent at arm's length. When thrown properly, the job itself can cause a lot of damage.

After wrapping my hands in long Ace bandage-like wraps that tighten when I make a fist, Ortiz introduced me to the basic fighting stance, my left foot ahead of my right foot, a comfortable distance between them.

To move to my left, he explained, I step with my left foot and drag my right foot as if it were in a bucket. The feet should never cross, nor be lifted any more than necessary. If I lift my foot up as I'm taking a punch, I am off balance and likely to go down.

My hands are up guarding my face, and my left arm is to snap forward as I step in at an angle to my opponent — which currently is my reflection in the mirror. I turn my wrist and clench my fist at the point of impact, concentrating the punch on the knuckles of my index and middle fingers.

Then I must pull the first back to my face just as quickly as it was thrown.

Along with the job, I learn the right cross, which follows in the job's wake. The right cross is thrown from my guard and as I bring it in, I turn my shoulder and hip with it, straightening my back leg and pivoting on my foot. It's the power punch; the whole body snaps at behind it.

It sounds simple enough, but the mistakes are many. The step is too far; I drop my right hand guard when I throw the job; I don't straighten my leg; I carry the right too far forward and pull myself off balance; I don't get my guard back up. It's as if I am introducing parts of my body to each other for the very first time, and my first steps in this new dance are halting and tentative.

This is why the warm-up exercises are followed by six three-minute rounds of shadow boxing. Boxers stand in front of the mirrors and work on the fundamental form of their punches.

Experienced boxers are shuffling about the gym, throwing combinations and breathing quick, *ji, ji, ji*. Beginners like myself are stumbling about, one two, one two, one two.

Simon Sanchez, a promising amateur with his name tattooed on his back with a pair of boxing gloves hanging off the '2', shadow boxed beside me one day. He asked me to work more rhythm into my shadow boxing, to loosen up a bit.

"It's like dancing," he said. "I'm in a horrible daze; I returned."

"So am I," he said.

Perhaps there is hope after all.

Round IV

The Bag Round boxing is followed by four rounds of work on the heavy bag, which hang in two rows between the mirrors and the ring. You don't need to ask if you've thrown a punch incorrectly when working the heavy bag. You feel

your knuckles buckle and pain shoot up your arm. You are certain you have done it, but your entire hand, then certainly two or three joints.

But the pain subsides as you practice your steps. *Shuffle left, step at an angle, jab, cross.* Ortiz and several of the experienced fighters help correct my form as I work the bag. Because I am dropping my right hand when I throw my left, they make me hold my thumbs against my chest until the punch is thrown. Ideally, this should also keep me from cocking my right before I throw it. It does not.

I found the heavy bag the most satisfying portion of the workout. While I did not envision the source of the stress and anxiety in my life when I worked the bag, somehow those stresses are gone by the end of four rounds. From time to time I dart my head about, smug like a boxer and let fly what I imagine to be a lethal one-two. As the weeks progress, the movements feel ever-so-slightly more natural.

There are two speed bags at the gym, the small black bladder that are popular in boxing films. I am surprised to learn that in actual, practical value in the world of boxing is minimal. In fact, they are rarely used and when they are, it is only for a few moments. The bag works hand-eye coordination and foot timing. So does jumping rope.

A third bag at the gym is the peanut bag, a small ball tied on both ends with a jumpy bungee cord.

I decide to aim between his gloves and see what happens. I fire off a jab and feel a flounder, one chunk rock through my head. All of my progress at keeping my right hand up was gone when I threw that jab. Instead, I dropped my right eye behind me, as if I was trying to sneak the punch in while moving back with the rest of my body. My chin was raised and as soon as I drop that right hand, my opponent made me say, "You learn quick in this business."

Round V

The ideal job "You talk skinny guys are straight-ahead fighters," Ortiz said. "You stick to the middle of the ring and you're bright."

Longhanks stands at more than 100 pounds and fights at 122 pounds (weightwise). He has had more than 10 amateur fights, some some and lost some, he said, and, like Sanchez, is training for an opportunity to be invited to the Olympic trials. Pulling that, both Longhanks and Sanchez likely will turn pro sometime next year.

"The thing about the job is it's got to be crisp," he said. "You can do power with it if it's crisp and powerful, like De La Hoya's." Ortiz De La Hoya's job is revered in the gym, though De La Hoya himself is not. While the caliber of De La Hoya's opponents is questioned, no one has said he hasn't got the tools, foremost of which is his crisp, hungry jab.

"Sometimes I get it right," Longhanks said. "Sometimes I throw it right and you feel it. You feel it when you throw it right."

What I have not solved about the job is the connection between my right leg and left arm. You don't merely step into the punch, but also step off the right leg. Somehow that power should find its way up through my body and into my job, which should sting, and pop and fly back to guard my face.

I can only dream of such jobs. Longhanks advised me to focus not on my fist when I throw the job but instead on the elbow. This keeps my elbow in when I throw the punch. It also keeps me from oversteering my elbow, which results in an alligator-bite like pain shooting through my

arm for the rest of the workout. The cream I am advised to put on the next day paper — my opponent bag caught up in the ropes and slapped me back, pulling me down into a stance so that someone how I was both in and out of the ring. I was rescued by one of the judges.

Round VI

I get in the ring. The first time I ever climbed into a boxing ring — which was to shoot pictures of the victor for the next day paper — my opponent bag caught up in the ropes and slapped me back, pulling me down into a stance so that someone how I was both in and out of the ring. I was rescued by one of the judges.

Three weeks into my training, I made my next appearance in the ring for "the job drill."

In this endeavor, two fighters box throwing only jobs with their left hand, while blocking incoming jobs with their right. Ortiz has over his most experienced fighters on the job drill on a regular basis.

My opponent is none other than the friend and fellow sportswriter who preceded me into the gym. Several boxers gather round, grinning, because the sight of two sportswriters slugfisting it out is not one you see everyday.

We take off our boxing gloves, spurs in their socks and are fitted with headgear. When the round begins, I come out and circle left, circle left, circle left.

I have forgotten where to throw my guard is up and there doesn't seem to be any opening. He throws three jobs that I block, still uncertain of what to do.

I decide to aim between his gloves and see what happens. I fire off a jab and feel a flounder, one chunk rock through my head. All of my progress at keeping my right hand up was gone when I threw that jab. Instead, I dropped my right eye behind me, as if I was trying to sneak the punch in while moving back with the rest of my body. My chin was raised and as soon as I drop that right hand, my opponent made me say, "You learn quick in this business."

Advice comes from all directions. *Double down, double down. Move right. Move right.*

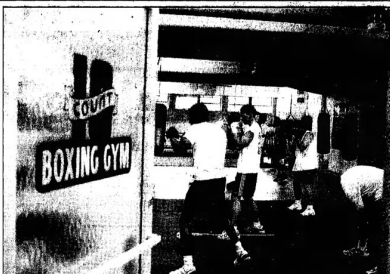
I do not know what double down means, nor do I know how to move to my right. Instead, I pick up the pace of my left-shuffle and drop my jab. I land a few, but drop my guard three more times, each time, paying the price. The shots do not hurt, per se, in the same way I understood pain prior to training. They are instead a warning and a surprise. *Get that guard up!*

A lifetime later, the round ends, and sweat pours from every pore on my body. I am exhausted in the pursuit, most elemental sense of the word.

When I undertake new endeavors, I tend to go to the library and read books about their philosophical implications. Among them I have read of the boxer as fighting a "distorted dream-image of himself" and that men are drawn to boxing because in its primal sense, it allows men to face death in a way women face giving birth to a child.

(Each time I have shared this latter theory with a mother, she has closed her eyes and shook her head in agreement.)

In my first trip to the ring, I cannot say I was jabbing at a distorted dream-image of myself. Instead, I felt safe only when moving and kept a constant sway to my left. As the round would down, I wanted simply to



Boxers in training shadow box in front of mirrors for six three-minute rounds. The routine is designed to condition proper punching form before hitting the bags or stepping into the ring.

endure it, to keep my chin tucked down and to survive.

I was a world away from Ortiz's instructions: you've got to relax in the ring; relax and let the punches flow.

Round VII

I meet Death. His name is Jason. He is 19 years old and his mother teaches fifth grade. Jason has been training as long as I have, and we are paired for a round of job drill. The main difference between Jason and myself is that Jason is a bright-eyed, natural athlete, and I am a sports-writer pushing 30.

When I drop my right against Death, he lands his fists with authority. I keep shuffling to my left and throwing, catching him on occasion but more often than not taking a shot. A hard shot.

They say in boxing that the punch that knocks you out is the one you never see coming, a shot several experienced fighters at the gym have confirmed for me. Jason does not knock me out, but neither do I see the punch coming. It magically appears in front of my eyes.

It hits me so hard I hear a bell and feel my head snap back. I crouch into a guard and shuffle left, shuffle left, throwing occasionally and wondering when the round will end.

As the workout ended that day, Ortiz told me I was a bit out-matched, that people don't usually pick things up as quick as Jason had. Then he shared one of the fundamental truths of boxing: "You can play football, play baseball and play tennis," he said, "but you do not play boxing. There's no playing in the ring. You know, now. You develop a whole new appreciation of the sport."

Longhanks pulled me aside to show me how to stutter-jab and told me I was throwing my job too high during the round.

"Your shoulders were like this," he said, and he curled his shoulders into a position with which I am too familiar.

I began to feel memory descended on me, long-silent anger and pain, hurt. I heard the voices of coaches who had cut me from soccer, baseball and basketball teams. I felt the heaviness in my throat that I had not felt for years. I took a jump rope and started

skipping with my back to the rest of the gym. I tried loosening my throat and clearing my mind. The sinking sea slanted in through one of the windows and I turned my face into it, closing my eyes and feeling its heat.

I whipped the rope around as fast as I could and skipped my feet with a vengeance, as if I could outrun my past, as if 19 years old and dead hadn't been strong and inevitable.

And for 10 seconds or so, as I skipped rope in the sun, I was. When I got home that evening, I discovered the finest of citizens in the corner of my left eye. I marched out of the bathroom and proudly showed it to my wife.

Them I ducked down and threw some shadow punches, and she said, "You're really fast. This is why we got married. If only for a moment or two, we have someone to believe in our expertise, to look at us in a way that we feel like ... Superman."

Round VIII

Winning and Losing Longhanks will go pro one day, so I have to teach them part of pro style fighting," he said.

"Amateur fighters throw a lot of combinations and punches and show me how to stuffer-jab and tell me I was throwing my job too high during the round."

"Your shoulders were like this," he said, and he curled his shoulders into a position with which I am too familiar.

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"I didn't think about that. I just thought 'win, win, win, win,'" he said. "That's what you got to do."

It was Key who won the gym's first trophy a few weeks ago at a show at Ft. Hood. On the Monday after his fight, he has a big smile on his mug and a perfect shiner around his eye. He is now 5-1 and working toward a niche as a heavyweight.

Round IX

Weight "Like a dancer, a boxer's 'his body, and is totally identified with it. And the body is identified with a certain weight."

—Joyce Carol Oates.

"On Boxing"

Ortiz has an innate ability to look at a fighter and tell what weight he should fight. When he began training Troje, Troje was fighting 132 pounds. He now fights flyweight (112 pounds) and is ranked in the top 10 in the world by 30 boxing organizations and associations.

There is much attention paid to weighing in after a workout as fighters work towards their ideal weight. Ortiz said a fighter could walk around one weight class above his fighting weight and the extra pounds would not much difficulty in the weeks prior to a fight.

The faces the gym come and go and change quickly. From time to time, fighters from the past reappear after absences of several months. This always draws a charged "Hey" from everyone at the gym, always with a few "Oh, my God!" and "Where've you been?"

One place they have been, it seems, is at the dining table. They jump rope with sweat-soaked as they battle the bulges that attacked them while they were away from the gym.

I must admit that while I have been working out three times a week at the gym, I have not been to conditioning workouts conducted on Tuesday and Thursday evenings. Usually the pressure of the next day's edition is such that I can not make it. It is such that I can not make it. It is such that I can not make it.

Returning boxers are subject to merciless taunts when weighing in. "That's convenient," someone said to me.

So it is.

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So it is.

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FURNITURE: 5,600 sq. ft. house full of Antiques & Modern Furniture; Dining Set, Bed, Parlor Set, Curbs, and Lots of Modern Furniture, Porcelain, and More. Also, 1000 sq. ft. house, full of furniture, and more. Also, 1000 sq. ft. house, full of furniture, and more. Also, 1000 sq. ft. house, full of furniture, and more.

See SWEET SCIENCE/88

SWEET SCIENCE/From 2B

in that first day.

"Hey, are you the coach?" someone might ask.

"What're you, in love or something," someone else will say.

"Yeah, in love with a Big Mac and a steak, maybe."

Fighters trying to make weight before a fight can look forward to a post-workout meal of 8 ounces of grapefruit juice.

This is not an easy life.

Not even for a welterweight (147 pounds), which is what Ortiz said I am.

Round X

The Sweet Science

Experienced fighters spar per Ortiz's schedule, often for three rounds or so three times a week. It is not until I approach the two-month mark that I spar for the first time, and I enter the ring determined to be relaxed and to let my punches flow.

This lasts about 10 seconds.

I have learned to move to my right, and am change directions easily. I am selecting my jab more confidently, and keeping my right hand high.

But I still lift my chin, and I take a few good tags every time.

When I throw my right, it is ugly. All of the shadow boxing, perfecting the form, turning my shoulder and hip, rotating on the axis of spine, it's all gone. What's there instead is an ugly arm punch that strikes without effect. I am surprised to find myself relying on my jab to keep my

opponent away from me.

When he gets in close, I am unsure of what to do. I cover up and duck out as best I can to the center of the ring.

Ortiz's comments are like "Nice punch, almost," which indicates that I am not turning on my right when I should be. The behavior is not yet ingrained.

I take a jab and counter. I am not sure with what.

It is not a right cross, for it swings well wide and from a far and distant land. Nor is it a hook, which I have yet to learn to throw. At best, it is an ugly meteor that does not appear on the boxing map, and this is the punch that I turn on, snapped my hip into, rotate on the axis of my spine.

What the punch does is fly safely past my opponent. Then it keeps going, taking my shoulder, and in turn, my hip around with it. It spins me around completely.

You never turn your back in the ring. It borders on shameful.

The punch, if it may be called such, is borne of eagerness that is not yet backed up with the training it needs. Each day at the gym opens more areas to be worked, more work to repeat, more behavior to learn.

But what I take with me from my first round sparring is not the shame of turning my back, nor the memory of the shots I take to the head.

It is the fact that I do not simply endure the round, but attempt to box it, that my shoulders are

back and my guard is up high.

It is an infinitesimally small step, but one in which I find some comfort.

Because we need a bit of comfort to counter the pain; we need to condition responses for when we're tired and we're hurt. We work to find the balance that lies between a left jab and a right cross, skipping a rope and working a bag.

In my own flowery writing, I tend to focus on grace and beauty in sport, on the inherent peace of a body in motion. But beauty and grace can not exist without their

antithesis, and balance comes only with commitment, pleasure only with pain. Two men stand in a ring with nothing in the world between them but their own lives and their fists, primal and immortal.

The sweet science is the study of these spaces. We study them because peace does not exist without conflict, and love is nothing without hate, because there are truths about ourselves that we must learn to face, and even share.

(Peter Brown is sports editor of the Herald-Zeitung. He can be reached at 625-9144, ext. 223.)

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