

Ring Notes I

I had my first boxing lesson today. I've always wanted to learn how to box, but I've never been able to find a way to do it that made sense, apart from in the backyard of a college party house wearing a motorcycle helmet. That made sense at the time. Ever since I formally retired at the age of 7 from my frontyard boxing career, my experience has really been limited to getting brained by brawny friends. The retirement came after my very first fight. My cousin Henry Cherry egged me and a neighborhood kid into going a couple bare knuckle rounds. I was feeling like Sugar Ray til I got walloped in the stomach, lost my wind, and decided boxing was kind of dumb...

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Today's lesson with Ray Pace at Go Time was the result of the kind of urban serendipity that keeps you going in a big town. When I first moved to Chicago, I went into the Yellow Pages to look for a boxing gym. It was part of the "new beginnings" period of my transition. I never found anything convenient, got back into soccer, got generally overwhelmed, and let the idea go. About two months ago, a new gym opened up two blocks from my apartment. It's got a glass storefront window that advertises in bright glowing light, in addition to the ubiquitous fitness machines and free weight sets, a spanking new boxing ring. I walked by a few times and told myself it was silly to try to get into boxing at age 31 and that the gym was silly to be opening up where it was, on the wrong side of the tracks but close enough to some gentrified condo complexes to get the yuppie crowd. I was like "how lame is boxing as fitness"? You know?

Then my girlfriend started talking about meeting the guys who opened it, and I got pissy and defensive without realizing it and sort of went into an unconscious boycott of the place till the other day. I was walking by on a cold clear Saturday afternoon on the way to the book store to order Cormac McCarthy's *Suttree* and as I was passing and looking in, Bryan Ewers, one of the physical trainers, waved at me and smiled, like, come check it out dude, it's sweet. So on the way back I did, and signed up right on the spot for a month's membership and a physical training appointment. But boxing was the priority. I wanted to get in the ring. So I made an appointment and there I was today, getting my hands wrapped in yellow cloth, sliding the training gloves on, and standing across from Ray Pace, who's a Chicago Westsider who had a successful amateur career and now trains full time.

The first thing Ray does after he wraps your hands is take you into the ring and say, "There's nothing you can do to embarrass yourself. I've seen absolutely everything." He's got kind of a Goodfellas accent that comes out through a broken nose and he looks you right in the eye when he's talking, like he might stick you with a stiff jab. It's easy to pay attention to what he says. Then he teaches you how to stand correctly and throw a jab with your left hand. That's where the learning began. I think anyone who's an athlete thinks they can box, and has spent a little time shadow boxing in bathroom mirrors. I'm a beast in front of a mirror, putting together five punch combos, bobbing, weaving, winking at my opponent. I could not throw a jab though, with Ray standing directly in front of me holding a stationary black mitt.

Ray reminds me of my high school baseball coach when he teaches punching, exaggerating the hip turn and pivoting on his back foot. "You gotta be on the ground to punch," he says. "Always on the ground." I started moving around the ring with him, left foot first, dragging the right with me, trying to keep my front leg splitting Ray right down the middle, trying to understand the punching range. "Quit thinking," Ray says. "Just move with me right now. I'm helping you." The room and then the ring shrunk gradually into a view finder. My left glove and Ray's face, nothing else. And him talking the whole time. "Let the hands go. Relax. You're too stiff. Don't reach. You see what happens when you reach? Now look what happens when you're too close. You're doing great. I could tell you're an athlete. You hear that? You heard that one right. That's what its sposed to sound like."

For forty minutes I stalked around the ring after him, hitting two and three punch combos with a jab and a straight right hand. That was it. It was plenty. Trying to keep the feet set, the weight straight up and down, turn the hips and reload, the hands loose but high and tight, trying to get the hands back after I threw them out. It was fun. Time passed. I'm hooked.

Ray and I talked a little about fight commentators. About how you can only listen to the boxers: Foreman , Teddy Atlas , Stewart. About how a guy like Mallorga could never beat a guy like De La Hoya simply because of the geometry of their techniques. During my rests I would hop around the ring and try bouncing off the ropes , just to see what it felt like to lie back into them and imagine Foreman's fist smashing through. The ring, I bet, can feel pretty small at times. On the way out Ray said, "You did good. Real good."

And maybe that's what I was looking for the whole time. That kind of approval from a master, from the man, from one of the Goodfellas. I know Ray does it forty times a day everyday. It didn't matter. I came down out of the ring feeling good and I jumped rope, something I haven't done since high school, for five minutes until my heart was pounding. I go back on Thursday.

How long til I feel like Barry McGuigan ?

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