

A full-page photograph of two men in a boxing stance, facing each other. They are shirtless, wearing black boxing trunks and red boxing gloves. The man on the left is labeled 'THE MAGICIAN' and the man on the right is labeled 'THE DUKE'. Both have their mouths open as if shouting or shouting. The background is black, and the lighting is dramatic, highlighting their muscles. The entire image is framed by a thick yellow border.

**THE
MAGICIAN**

**THE
DUKE**



Find out
how our two
mild-mannered
staffers faced
their fears
and got
fighting fit



CHUMPS INTO CHAMPS

BY BEN JHOTY & LUKE BENEDICTUS PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN RINTOUL & ESA RUOHONEN

IN THE RED CORNER

Ben "The Mauritian Magician" Jhoty – Senior Writer

THE STREETS OF Canberra aren't known for being particularly mean, yet for a period during the mid-Nineties, when I was at uni there, I often felt like I had a sign on my back that said, "Hit me". At least that's what every drunk in our nation's capital seemed to think. On three occasions, paralytic yobbos took a swing at me and, on three occasions, I either absorbed their drunken flailing or calmly talked them down.

I'm a lover, not a fighter; a talker, not a stalker; a pacifist, not an activist. If someone knocks over my beer in the pub, I'm the one who'll apologise. Until now, my younger brother is the only person to whom I've ever raised a fist in anger. Even then, it was only once. He went down like he was on the take. I'll never forget his cry of pain as he hit the ground. For the next 20 years, my fists have remained unclenched.

My initial reaction to our deputy editor's suggestion that my colleague Luke and I get in the ring was instinctive. "No," I said. But he persisted. I told my girlfriend. "No," she said instinctively.

Yet I couldn't quite let it go. While my history of diplomacy in the face of conflict has meant I have a full set of teeth and a straight nose, I wondered if it might also signal a broader lack of self-confidence. I started to fantasise about the ways in which 10 weeks of boxing training could transform me. I envisioned staring down an attacker, knowing that I possessed the tools to defend myself. I pictured my body hardening up, like Peter Parker's after a bite from a radioactive spider. I imagined skipping like champion boxer Floyd Mayweather Jr.

"Okay, I'll do it," I said finally. And with that, I turned my back on years of meek civility and surrendered to something more primal.

IN THE BLUE CORNER

Luke "The Duke" Benedictus – Sections Editor

PHYSICAL TOUGHNESS doesn't have much relevance in my day-to-day world. Things would probably be different if I was the leader of a biker gang or a professional ninja. But instead I'm a bumbling journalist whose last fist fight occurred in a school playground more than 20 years ago (I lost). Since then, I've avoided violent confrontations wherever possible, a state of affairs that seems broadly compatible with civilised living. To me, physical toughness seems a quaintly anachronistic concept, like codpieces or cobbled streets.

Yet avoidance ultimately breeds fear. On the rare occasion that violence has gatecrashed my life, I've had absolutely no idea how to handle it. I was mugged recently and when the bloke clocked me, I crumpled to the ground, less out of pain than bewildered shock. I failed to throw a single punch in reply. Hopefully, boxing will help me to negotiate any similar situation while retaining a degree of self-respect.

Plus there's the physical dimension. Boxing demands a level of fitness that I'm light years away from. "Exercise regimen" is a rather grandiose term for my current schedule that basically amounts to a weekly game of park football. But these days I'm slower around the pitch than ever, have one dodgy knee and have gained the odd kilo or three. The fact that I'm not significantly podgier owes more to genetic fluke than personal discipline. My attitude to food and booze is like Elvis' during his Vegas years: anything goes. But at 32, I realise that I've tacitly resigned myself to slow physical decline. This fight offers a possible escape route. Albeit one booby-trapped with punches to the head.





THE MAGICIAN

Woolloomooloo PCYC is everything you'd imagine an old-school boxing gym to be. Ancient newspaper clippings and celebrated fight posters cover the walls, sweat stings the nostrils and the rhythmic pounding of the speedball echoes around the building, as would-be fighters compete for the most elusive title of all: respect.

Luke and I are at our first session with PCYC Arena manager Corey Bocking, a powerfully built exercise physiologist who helped get former Australian light heavyweight contender Paul "Hurricane" Briggs in shape. It's Corey's job to transform us from puffy pen-pushers to hardened combatants capable of enduring three two-minute rounds in the ring. He's optimistic the transformation will be

That night I unleash combinations in front of my bedroom mirror

complete in 10 weeks. We take comfort from Muhammed Ali's insistence to a student who asked if he should stay in college that "if they can make penicillin out of mouldy bread, they can sure make something out of you".

To gauge our progress, Corey pinches our puny physiques for fat and measures the circumference of our limbs. I'm slightly alarmed that not only are Luke's arms bigger than mine, he also has a full 10 kilograms on me. I'm aiming to close the gap by eating a high-protein diet (more eggs and shakes) and following a structured weights program.

Having never worked my legs before, Corey reckons I could add extra muscle to my slender frame by targeting this area with a variety of dumbbell squat exercises. I'll also be lowering my reps

from 10 to five on the bench press, allowing me to lift more weight for maximum strength gains.

Despite his extra bulk, Luke leaves me in his wake in a three-kilometre time trial. I cross the line one minute and 25 seconds after him. "At this level, the fittest bloke usually wins [the fight]," remarks Corey. Shit!

THE DUKE

Corey decides we're going to fight at light middleweight (69kg). This is unfortunate, given that I weigh 76kg. After analysing my diet, Corey tells me to cut back on carbs in the evening, increase my protein intake and limit the booze to 2-3 drinks a week. It's going to be a long 10 weeks.

Our six training sessions a week combine gym work, boxing technique, interval sprint training and punishing runs on the sand hills at Cronulla [in Sydney's south]. As I'm trying to get leaner, Corey sticks me on a

metabolic program that's designed to maintain muscle mass and strength, while torching body fat. This translates into endless bodyweight exercises like dips, burpees (which I hate), medicine-ball push-ups and squats. The emphasis is on high reps with minimal rest between exercises.

The first gym sessions aren't pretty. Even the most basic aspects of boxing are beyond me. My skipping is a flat-footed joke – I struggle to complete 20 jumps without stumbling and my calves keep knotting with cramps. My jabs are so weak they'd barely bruise a grape. But the variety of the program ensures that things never get boring. Having the fight on the horizon focuses our efforts and gives the training a sense of urgency.



Bruise control for The Duke.

The Magician don't need no wand.





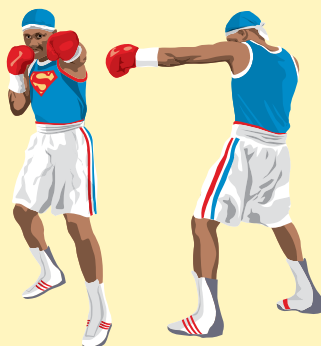
THE MAGICIAN

Luke and I stand in front of a full-length mirror, our feet either side of a chalk line, listening to the instructions of our trainer Dale Kalnins. He's a former Kings Cross bouncer, Navy meteorologist, actor (he fought Heath Ledger in *Two Hands*) and karate black belt who's trained boxers for more than 25 years. Dale is drilling us on the technical complexities of "the sweet science", revealing the mechanics of the punch and how true power begins with the feet and is uncoiled through the hips and shoulders.

"When you learn new movements, you're creating new neural pathways in your brain," he says, as he mimes slow-motion combinations in the mirror. "It's like hacking your way through the jungle with a machete. The first time there's lots of branches in your way and you have to work really hard. But the more you do it, the clearer it becomes." The best way to clear the path? Shadowboxing, advises Dale. That night I unleash combinations in front of my bedroom mirror. It's a ritual that will soon become second nature. ➔

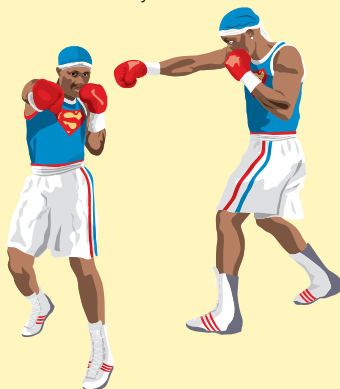
BOXING CLEVER

Master the key punches with the help of two-time world champion Gairy "The Superman" St Clair. Southpaws should reverse all the left- and right-hand instructions



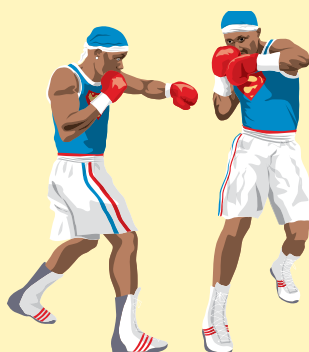
STRAIGHT RIGHT

Drive off the ball of your right foot, pivoting your hip and shoulder towards the target while bringing your left hand back to guard your chin. Keeping your shoulders over your hips and your elbows tucked in, throw your right fist towards the target in a straight line, rotating the fist on impact. Then snap the fist back to your chin.



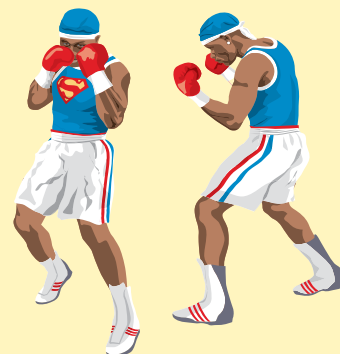
LEFT JAB

Stand with your hands up and elbows tucked in. Step out with your left foot, using the ball of the right foot to propel your weight forward. Keeping your chin tucked behind your shoulder, pop the left glove to the target in a straight line, rotating the fist on impact so you connect with the knuckle area of the glove. Then snap your fist back to guard your chin.



RIGHT UPPERCUT

Propel your weight off the ball of your right foot, drop your right shoulder and let your forearm fall towards the ground. Then explosively drive straight up the centreline of your body with your punching hand. As soon as you've thrown the punch, reverse the motion to bring your right hand back to the guard position. Keep your left hand glued to the side of your head throughout to guard against a counter.

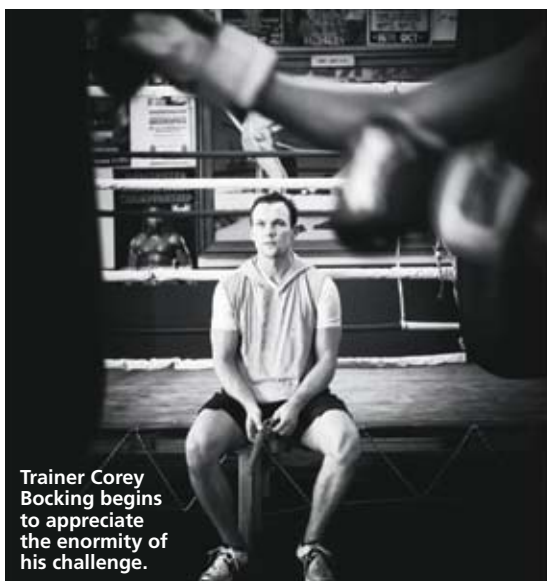


LEFT HOOK

Open your stance, keeping your right foot planted and shifting your left foot onto your toes. Your left arm is bent at the elbow at 90° while your right hand is guarding your chin. Raise the heel of your left foot and pivot your hip while unwinding your torso to slam your hand against the target. Twist back to your original stance. Keep your right hand pulled close to your head throughout for protection.

Leave your opponent punch-drunk with these common combinations

- Left jab, left jab, straight right
- Left jab, right uppercut, left hook
- Left jab, straight right, left hook
- Left jab, straight right, left hook, right hook



Trainer Corey Bocking begins to appreciate the enormity of his challenge.



THE DUKE

My first sparring session is with Gairy "The Superman" St Clair. I've certainly got my work cut out – Gairy is a two-time super featherweight champion of the world. Measuring just 163 centimetres, he's loaded with sleek muscle and glides about the ring with effortless fluidity.

Things don't get off to the best of starts when, within the first 10 seconds, I'm left chewing a punch that sends both my contact lenses flying. Gairy is exerting perhaps one-tenth of his effort, but still evades my jabs with comical ease.

I'm powerless to stop him from playing the bongos on my head

By the third round I'm really struggling. Exhaustion causes my arms to drop, opening me up to what would be a blizzard of punches but, as Gairy is taking it so easy, is really more of a light drizzle. "C'mon, work," he yells. But there's no escape and I'm powerless to stop him from playing the bongos on my head. I simply don't pack the kryptonite to keep "The Superman" at bay.

THE MAGICIAN

As the weeks pass, boxing consumes my life. I overdose on *Rocky*, dine out on sparring stories and throw combinations at my leaner reflection every time I feel at a loose end.

It's beginning to pay off. In front of the mirror I'm well balanced, relaxed and, thanks to Dale's continued urgings, have started bringing my non-punching hand back to my chin to defend myself. Luke, meanwhile, has a tendency to tense up, wasting precious energy. He also appears to have lead in his boots. As I will soon discover, though, it's in his gloves, too.

In the ring, where we spar against Corey, Luke looks like a natural bar-room brawler. He keeps coming forward, throws loads of punches

and chases Corey all over the ring. In contrast, I'm defensive and hesitant. Reluctant to get in close due to a fear of the counter-punch, I find myself punching thin air as Corey effortlessly steps out of reach of my combinations. I try telling myself that superior technique trumps raw aggression, but as I'm becoming increasingly aware, this ain't gymnastics.

PUNCH-PROOF ABS

Boxers need rock-hard abs to absorb body blows and generate punching power from their core. Perform this abs circuit, taking a 10-second rest between exercises. At the end, rest for one minute, then repeat the circuit

LEG LIFTS

Lie on your back, legs bent and feet flat on the floor. Raise your right leg off the ground so your calf is perpendicular to the floor, then raise your left leg up alongside it, before lowering one leg at a time. That's one rep. Perform 20 on each leg.



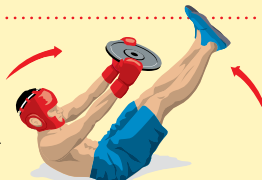
DEAD BUGS

Lie on your back, knees bent. Raise your right leg off the floor while bringing your right arm off the ground and over your head behind you. Lower your arm and leg until they're hovering just off the floor, then repeat for the other side. Complete 10 reps on each side.



WEIGHTED TOE TOUCH

Lie on your back with both legs straight up. Holding a 10kg weight plate against your chest, raise the plate straight up, reaching towards your toes, then lower your shoulders to the floor. Repeat 30 times.



WEIGHTED CRUNCH

Lie on your back, knees bent, holding a 10kg weight plate. Slowly crunch up, bringing your shoulderblades off the ground. Repeat 30 times.



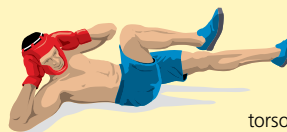
FLUTTER-FLY

Manoeuvre into a V-position with your legs elevated and upper body off the floor. Bring your arms level with your knees and flutter them up and down in a 10cm range, repeating the motion 100 times.



BICYCLE

Lie on your back with knees bent and hands behind your ears. Pump your legs back and forth as you rotate your torso from side to side by moving an arm pit towards the opposite knee. Do 15 reps on each side.



WEIGHTED LATERAL TWIST

Sit on the floor with your knees bent and feet flat. Holding a 10kg plate, twist to the left as far as you can, pause, then reverse the movement and twist all the way back to the right as far as you can. Do 15 reps on each side.





The punishing challenge of Cronulla's cruel sand hills.



THE DUKE

After six weeks I've lost several kilograms and can handle our 10-minute skipping warm-ups without melting into a puddle of sweat on the gym floor. Our boxing styles have also begun to evolve. I'm more comfortable fighting off my front foot and coming forward at my opponent. This isn't a conscious strategy – it just feels natural. Although admittedly I'd rather be the hammer than the nail.

Watching Ben spar, he's more technically proficient and maintains a much tighter defence. But he also looks tentative and always hangs back – like he's trying to swim without getting wet. I throw more punches (good), but also blunder into a lot more (bad).

I try to put a positive spin on my defensive shortcomings by telling myself they should leave me better conditioned to soak up the big hits on the night.



Above: The Superman attempts to pass on his "special powers" to Ben.

Right: The Magician works the speedball.



THE MAGICIAN

As our 10-week physical odyssey approaches its inevitable climax, I feel like I'm in the best shape of my life. I've lost three kilos of fat and added two kilos of lean muscle, mainly to my legs and shoulders.

Miraculously, I've managed to achieve this while increasing my endurance base. At the halfway mark I'd closed the gap on Luke in the time trial to 14 seconds. I'm also right on his heels in our sand hill sessions, a gruelling battle against an unforgiving gradient, a shifting surface, spiking lactate levels and the voices in your head that scream "STOP" as your legs seize up like an exhausted marathon runner.

Our last sparring sessions are particularly heavy. Corey nails me with a vicious right uppercut to the ribs. The wind sucks out of me instantly, but the pain lingers. Afterwards, he tells me, "You need to work on setting up with your jab and then getting in close with that right hand. You've got to commit to the punch."

Over the next few days, I keep coming back to Corey's words as I think about my tactics for the fight.

If I fight the way I have in sparring, I probably won't get hurt. But I won't be able to get in range to land any punches of my own; I won't be able to win. By going on the attack there's a good chance I'll catch Luke unawares. He's expecting me to duck and dance around the ring. He may not be ready for shock and awe.

The downside, of course, is that I'll be open to the counter-punch and all that goes with it, namely pain. It's like asking a girl out. You can't get lucky if you don't take a risk.



My internal ruminations manifest in my shadowboxing session the night before the fight. As I throw my last combination, I'm so far forward I hit the mirror. If this were a movie, I'd have the climax to my training montage. Now I've got to do it in the ring.

THE DUKE

In the closing stages of the training I've started looking forward to the sparring sessions with Corey where we attempt to put theory into practice. These are two-minute rounds of the rawest exhilaration. Bouncing around the ring, hands up, chin down, the

rest of the world disappears as you feint and circle, your body alive with adrenaline and braced for sudden impact. Your immersion in the moment is total. Lose your focus for a split second and a painful reminder will land right between the eyes. It's here that the real thrill lies.

After our final session, I walk home loaded with endorphins and secretly proud of my new black eye. I've begun to appreciate that line in *Fight Club*: "After fighting, everything else in your life got the volume turned down."

THE MAGICIAN

It's fight night! A vocal crowd of about 120 has gathered at the PCYC Arena to watch the night's string of amateur fights, plus an exhibition sparring session between Solomon Haumono, the former rugby league hardman turned pro boxer, and veteran heavyweight "Big Bob" Mirovic.

My adrenaline is spiking, but, thanks to a visit to a sports psychologist, I've developed a "loop" of positive affirmations. Hopefully, it will help prevent a hormonal power surge that could see me expend too much energy too quickly. It's also designed to block out distracting anxieties, like the fact that I'm about to perform the equivalent of public speaking with my shirt off – with the potential to be knocked out.

"Hands up, punch forward, I know I can win," I repeat to myself as I wait for ring announcer Craig Markham to call my name.

Tensions run high for the two contenders as the fight night looms.





THE DUKE

“Severe head, neck and other injuries, including death and paralysis, may occur despite using this equipment,” warns the tag on my protective headgear. I read this cheery message as I sit in the dressing room waiting to be ushered to the ring. It’s not the ideal morale booster.

Nevertheless, I feel ready. I’m braced for a tight contest but don’t want to contemplate losing. All along I’ve reminded myself that self-belief is vital. I now understand why the pros spout all that “I am the greatest”



Top: Ben kindly shares his pugilistic ring craft with world super flyweight champ Vic Darchinyan.

Left: Gairy St Clair wraps Ben's hands in the company of Solomon Haumono.

KNOCKOUT SHAPE

This boxing circuit works your technique, speed, power and endurance. Warm up with 10 minutes of skipping. For the work/rest ratio in the first five rounds use the Tabata interval style of timing (20 seconds work then 10 seconds rest). Work hard during the rounds and then take a 30-second rest



ROUND 1 Left/right combination (2 mins)

Step forward lead-hand jab (left jab), then back to fighting position; step back and perform a straight power-hand jab (straight right).

ROUND 2 Uppercuts (2 mins)

Step forward lead-hand uppercut (left uppercut), then back to fighting position; step back and perform a power-hand uppercut (right uppercut).

ROUND 3 Hooks (2 mins)

Step forward lead-hand hook (left hook), then back to fighting position; step back and perform a power-hand hook (right hook).

ROUND 4 Parallel punching (2 mins)

Get a large tyre (alternatively use a small box or 20-30cm-high step) and some 3kg dumbbells. Place one foot on the tyre while holding a dumbbell overhead on the same side. Bounce from one foot to the other, staying on the balls of your feet, while punching one dumbbell in the air in synchronisation with your feet.

ROUND 5 Diagonal punching (2 mins)

This time use the diagonal punching method. When your left foot is on the tyre or box, your right hand is in the air. Again go as fast as you can for 20 seconds then rest for 10 seconds for a total of four reps.

ROUND 6 Medicine-ball push-up

This is an old-school favourite. Assume the push-up position with one hand on a medicine ball. Lower your body, then push up explosively to place your hand on the ball. Complete 6-8 reps on each side, rest for 30 seconds, then repeat for a total of four sets.

ROUND 7 Walking lunge with rotation

Holding a 5-10kg medicine ball, take a big step out with your right foot into the lunge position. Take the ball over your head and lower to your hip on the right side, then step forward with your left foot while raising the ball above your head and bring it down on the left-hand-side of your body, completing 6-8 reps each side (12-16 steps). Give yourself 30 seconds rest then repeat the set four times.

ROUND 8 Heavy-bag power-hand drill (2 mins)

Throw three lead-hand jabs at a punch bag, focusing on speed and finding your range for your power-hand (straight, hard right) and power-hand hook to the body (right hook to the body). Return to your stance, move around the bag then repeat. Give every power shot 100 per cent.

ROUND 9 Heavy-bag speed drill (2 mins)

Throw any 3-4-punch combination as fast as you can. Focus on your hand speed and try to keep loose. Then move around the bag and throw your next flurry.

ROUND 10 Heavy-bag endurance drill (3 mins)

Finish with three minutes of non-stop punching. Throw 30 seconds of unders (as if you're hitting into your opponent's body with alternate arms), then 30 seconds of overs (hitting your opponent's chin). Go as hard as you can, leaving nothing in the tank.



In the red corner, weighing in at 67kg, the Freight Train of Pain, the Prince of Darkness, it's the Mauritian Magician, Ben Jhoty!

Let's Get Ready to Rumble!

FRIDAY NIGHT IS... FIGHT NIGHT

THE MAIN EVENT

The 'Mauritian Magician'
BEN JHOTY
Men's Health Senior Writer

Undeclared Australian heavyweight contender

SOLOMON HAUMONO
BIG BOB MIROVIC

Top-ranked PCYC amateur fighters
JOSH SENC O'YOUNG
JASPER SCANNELL

V

Luke 'The Duke'
BENEDICTUS
Men's Health Sections Editor

Undeclared Australian light middleweight contender

KING DAVIDSON
PETER GEORGIU

and **JOHNNY LEWIS**,
trainer of world-champion
boxers Keshya Tazuo,
Jeff Fenech, Jeff Harding,
Vergil Hill and
Gairy St Clair

Ring Announcer
CRAIG MARKHAM

\$10 ENTRY

FRIDAY MARCH 20, 7.00PM
City of Sydney - Woolloomooloo PCYC 51 Cathedral St (cnr Riley St)
Funds raised will go towards helping PCYC in its mission to help keep youth off the streets

THE MAGICIAN

"Hands up, punch forward, I know I can win." Twenty seconds into the fight and my fiendish plan to surprise Luke with all-out attack is paying dividends. I've landed three or four straight rights already. However, there's no satisfaction, no pleasurable sensation, I just keep punching.

Luke is not a workmate, or even a friend. He's just a faceless opponent. Then it comes. He nails me with successive right hands that reverberate around my skull. I've got an instant headache, but there's no time to truly digest the pain before another blow lands. I'm throwing punches back at him the way my mother used to throw socks into the washing machine, and some of them are finding their mark.

As the round ends, Gairy, who's my corner man, tips water over me and tells me I'm doing well. I just want to get back out there. The respite creates anxieties. The crowd, which I've barely heard until now, suddenly registers. "Kill him," screams one bloke. "Kill the bastard."

THE DUKE

At the opening bell, Ben charges forward and instantly lands three walloping rights. This triggers some animal part of my brain. All the hours of training, all my planned combinations, are sucked into a whirlpool of adrenaline. Stunned by that initial onslaught, I flail wildly in response. It's messy and chaotic, desperate and intense. The round hurtles by as though in fast-forward, a furious blur of punches and sweat.

At the break, I'm sure I've lost the first round. "You're doing all right," insists Dale in my corner. "Keep using your jab." I gulp mouthfuls of air and remind myself of my intentions. Jab to the head, jab to the body, straight right. I've got to bounce back.

THE MAGICIAN

Luke comes out hard in the second, knocking me to the floor with a straight right that sends my "freight train of pain" careering off the tracks. I hit the canvas hard, and for the first time in the fight I have a



In the blue corner, weighing in at 69kg, the Leicester Molester, the Count of Monte Fisto, it's Luke "The Duke" Benedictus!



verifiable emotion: fear. The spectres of humiliation and defeat loom, but I can't let them in.

Instead, I spring back up and endure the ref's count before throwing myself back into the fray. My much-vaunted defence has all but disappeared. Punches are cannoning into my head but I keep punching back, not knowing whether my blows are landing. I have a feeling Luke's doing the same.

THE DUKE

Once again, my strategy totally disintegrates the instant the bell rings. Instead, it's kangaroos at dawn. My composure implodes amid the rush of violence. All that's left is dumb pride and steaming testosterone.

But at least I'm holding my own. I catch Ben with a straight right on the chin to send him tumbling to the canvas. Frankly, I'm as surprised as he is – it's more luck than design. Nor is it much of a turning point. Our exchanges are still frenzied and clumsy, a mad tangle of whirling arms; I'm never remotely in control.



Fighting kangaroos: weeks of disciplined training sail straight out the window.



GET PSYCHED

In terms of adrenaline, a big fight is like a first date, your biggest exam and first overseas trip wrapped into one, according to sports psychologist John Crampton. Use these mental jabs to make sure you're in the right headspace for your next contest

► **CONTROL THE CONTROLLABLES** "Normal people worry about things they can't control in competitive situations," says Crampton. "The nature of the venue, nature of officials, what the result will be, what people think of me, what my opponent will do. Come back to right now. What can you actually control?"

► **MAKE A LOOP** Adrenaline is one of the biggest threats to an organised game plan. The best way to contain and harness this hormonal power supply is to develop a structured thinking process, or a "loop", involving some simple key words; that is, "move your feet, make it hard for him".

"It's like having the car in neutral rather than revving up to 6000 revs," says Crampton. "It's a question of putting your adrenaline in neutral."

► **WHERE'S YOUR HEAD AT?** In a sporting contest your focus can either be "out of your head" on your opponent or "in your head" on your self and how you're feeling, explains Crampton. "If something happens that throws you, the probability of you being stuck in your head instead of being out of your head reacting to your opponent is high. You need to factor in all the possibilities that could happen and have a plan to deal with each of them."

► **BUILD A WALL** "In sport, you need a brick wall of self-belief," says Crampton. "Brick number one: I'm fit. Brick number two: I'm quick on my feet. Put some mortar on it. That's how you build a wall and that's what you return to when things get tough."

► **BE YOURSELF** Not blessed with the ability to verbally deconstruct your opponent with a thunderous burst of rhyming slang? Don't bother trying.

"You have to be you," says Crampton. "As soon as you try to be someone else, that's one of the things that'll break down in a pressure situation."

THE MAGICIAN

After two frenetic rounds in which we've been overly "head hungry", I finally throw an uppercut to Luke's body. It's met with more blows to my head that drive me to the ropes. I drop my hands and look at the ceiling. There's an agonising moment where I feel like a blind man crossing a road, as I wait for the next punch. It's a horrible feeling. Thankfully the ref intervenes and I get another eight count.

As the seconds tick away, I'm hanging on. The adrenaline ran out long ago, but somehow we muster one last exchange before it's over.

Afterwards, the ref holds each of our hands as we await the judges' decision. The first judge scores it my way. I'm shocked. The second judge gives it to Luke. The third judge is split. It's a draw.

THE DUKE

Despite the knockdown and standing count, I never fancy my chances awaiting the verdict. My overriding perception of the fight is still dominated by the nightmare of that opening exchange. The Magician's blitzkrieg of early rights left me frazzled and I never recovered my poise. Over three rounds I failed to throw a single bodyshot. When the draw is announced, I respond with exhausted relief. It's over.

THE MAGICIAN

I'm a little embarrassed by the result. In my heart I know I've been beaten. But I don't feel like a loser. Instead, I'm proud that I've found the courage to be aggressive. I've thrown, and landed, more punches in the last six minutes than I have in the previous five weeks

of sparring. At the same time, I've also taken more head shots.

In the days that follow, I try replaying the fight in my head, but it seems there's a missing reel or two. I do remember punching with abandon and wonder whether, if I'd managed to temper my sting with a little more zing, my defence could have given me a points decision? One thing's for sure, though, I don't want a rematch.

Am I better placed to fend off an attacker on a cold night in Canberra? Not yet. In 10 weeks, Luke and I have only scratched the surface of the sport. We now realise just how much we've got to learn.

But I'm no longer a fight virgin and that has an almost immediate effect. There's a little more steel in my step. By opening myself up to defeat in such a public forum, I feel like I've confronted

Main pic: Ben hits the canvas after a straight right from Luke.

Below (from top): Luke and cornerman Dale Kalnins; our boys go blow for blow; Ben's cornerman, Gairy St Clair, congratulates him at the end of the bout.

I hit the canvas hard and for the first time in the fight I have a verifiable emotion: fear.





several fears at once – flirting with humiliation, facing up to performance anxiety and coming to grips with pain. Collectively, they’ve helped shape a more assertive posture with which I can now face the world. Perhaps most importantly, I’ve reminded myself that without risk, there can be no reward.

THE DUKE

The next day my euphoria is tinged with disappointment. My self-discipline vanished under pressure. Instead of harnessing my adrenaline, I was overwhelmed by it. Weirdly, I also feel a twinge of guilt. I remember the moment, in the third round, when Ben dropped his hands and looked away. Punching people is clearly the whole point of boxing. Yet that memory still makes me wince.

US author Norman Mailer described this emotional conflict at length. Boxing, he wrote, “arouses two of the deepest anxieties we contain. There is not only the fear of getting hurt, which is profound in more men than will admit

to it, but there is the opposite panic, equally unadmitted, of hurting others.”

Confronting those twin emotions head-on in front of 120 screaming people is howlingly intense. But where else can you explore such primal impulses in a safe environment? Stepping into that ring was one of the most thrilling experiences of my life.

It’s also left me in the best condition of my life. In 10 weeks my body fat plummeted from 19.2 per cent to 9.9 per cent. My dodgy knee disappeared as my calf muscles strengthened and I’ve swapped my chap baps for what, under sympathetic lighting, looks vaguely like an emerging six-pack.

One week after the fight, I’m itching to give that heavy bag another pummeling. Could I have been a contender? Apparently not, but at least I’m still undefeated.

Watch the fight, follow the 10-week training program and catch a boxing masterclass from Gairy St Clair at yahoo7.com.au/menshealth.



GET IN THE RING

Muhammad Ali is just one of the boxing greats who’s trained at Woolloomooloo PCYC. This heritage gym offers a range of boxing classes and corporate programs that enable you to train with some of the top boxers and trainers in the country. For more info see: pcycarena.com.au. To find other PCYC boxing facilities go to: pcycsw.org.au or pcyc.org.au.



ROADWORK

“The most specific way to condition yourself for boxing is a form of interval running that mimics the work/rest ratios of a round (2-3 minutes),” says strength and conditioning coach Corey Bocking (performancetraininginstitute.com.au) “Intervals of this nature train the anaerobic lactic acid system, while also providing aerobic benefits.” Use the following running program to get fighting fit

WEEK 1

3km time trial (max effort)

WEEK 2

4 x 600m run (85%)
90 seconds’ rest between,
then 3 minutes’ rest, then
5 x 60m sprint (95%+) walk
back recovery

WEEK 3

4 x 600m run (85%)
90 seconds’ rest between,
then 3 minutes’ rest, then
6 x 60m sprint (95%+) walk
back recovery

WEEK 4

5 x 600m run (85%)
90 seconds’ rest between,
then 3 minutes’ rest, then
6 x 60m sprint (95%+) walk
back recovery

WEEK 5

3km time trial (max effort),
then 3 minutes’ rest, then
20-minute easy-pace run

WEEK 6

8 x 400m run (85%)
90 seconds’ rest between,
3 x 150m sprint (95%+)
jog back (90 sec max)

WEEK 7

10 x 400m run (85%)

90 seconds’ rest between,
3 x 150m sprint (95%+)
jog back (90 sec max), then
3 minutes’ rest, then
3 x 150m sprint (95%+)
jog back (90 sec max)

WEEK 8

10 x 400m sprint (85%)
90 seconds’ rest between,
3 x 150m sprint (95%+)
jog back (90 sec max), then
3 minutes’ rest, then
3 x 150m sprint (95%+)
jog back (90 sec max), then
3 minutes’ rest, then
3 x 150m sprint (95%+)
jog back (90 sec max)

WEEK 9

10 x 400m sprint (100%)
90 seconds’ rest between,
3 x 150m sprint (100%)
jog back (90 sec max), then
3 minutes’ rest, then
3 x 150m sprint (100%)
jog back (90 sec max), then
3 minutes’ rest, then
3 x 150m sprint (100%)
jog back (90 sec max)

WEEK 10

3km time trial (max effort),
then 3 minutes’ rest, then
20-minute easy-pace run