

## Boxing and the Canadian Soul

*“The wait in the dressing room before a fight – that last hour – could strip a man who never fought before of whatever heart, courage and desire he thought he had...”*  
(John ‘Iceman’ Scully)

When you fight in a boxing match, the whole world goes grey. I realized that about fifteen seconds into the fight. I was boxing in the white-collar bout just before the Brazeau-Trudeau match last Saturday. There were hundreds of people watching but the only thing that my mind comprehended was that I was in a cramped, closed ring with another person who wanted to hurt me. Anything tangential, anything unimportant to my physical survival my senses could not take in. My opponent, Jeff Davis, a muscular businessman who runs the *Heart & Crown* bar in the market, appeared white against the grey wall. I hit him with an up-down-up, Cuban combination and moved quickly to my left. For I knew that Jeff loves to fight and that his entire strategy was to inflict as much pain as possible on me.

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When I took up boxing, a number of years ago, one of the surprises was the level of good manners in the sport. I played competitive soccer almost all my life and compared to boxing it is a nest of cheating, lying and whining bad sportsmanship. For example, in soccer it is quite usual for players to swear at the referee. Many fans regard it as a sign of how hard a player is trying. Many fans also think pretending to be hurt to get your opponent penalized is a good thing and as for players falling over to draw a foul it is now almost an art form. Boxing, to my astonishment, has none of these problems. The modern variation of the sport was organized by a 19<sup>th</sup> century British aristocrat and it still has the vestiges of the code of the gentlemen. The referee and judges wear bow ties. The fighters shake hands with their opponent’s coaches and cornermen, and often at the end of a long, violent fight, they hug.

The other surprise was that most boxers are extraordinarily modest outside the ring. I had expected them to be mostly Mike Tyson or Floyd Mayweather-like jerks. What I discovered was the norm for real boxers is a strong sense of humility. What they have to do inside a ring is so intense, the line between victory and defeat so thin, that there is little energy to waste on outside nonsense. However, there is a hard, undeniable core of brutality that is at boxing’s heart. The strong emphasis on good manners at all times (except for the weigh-in where boxers are supposed to go through pantomime insults to drum up ticket sales) is a cover for this sheer visceral animalism.

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In the second round, Jeff hit me with three slow, hard left-hooks. Each punch hurt. I staggered. Through the grey wall of my senses, I could hear a section of the crowd roar with approval. The sound frightened me as much as his blows did. To hear people rejoicing because you are being hurt is a surreal, unpleasant experience. I could feel it in the ring as a palpable presence. In less time than it takes to read these lines, my body moved automatically out of range of his punches and I stopped, winded and waited for his next attack.

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In the weeks before the fight I trained with both Justin Trudeau and Patrick Brazeau. They handled themselves well. In the gym, there were no airs or graces from either of them and the other fighters were roughly divided as to who would win. But on the night of the fight I knew Trudeau would take it almost as soon as I walked into the dressing room. There was a very gentle fellow standing beside Trudeau. We shook hands and I realized it was Ali Nestor, the great Montreal fighter. In true boxing form, Nestor, the most dangerous person in the room, was also the most understated and shy. Trudeau told me that Nestor was his coach. I laughed and said, *“Oh that is your secret!”* For up to that moment Trudeau had displayed a public attitude of casual surprise, *“What there is a fight on?! Oh yes, I should probably train for it.”* At the official weigh-in a few days before the fight, he had been drinking a beer (Jeff and I had not touched alcohol for weeks). In reality, he had been training very hard with one of Canada’s best fighters.

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At the end of the third round, my concentration slipped. There were about thirty seconds to go, I was in the lead in points. Despite my sensory deprivation, or possibly because of it, I had been boxing well throughout the fight, steadily scoring points with left jabs and combinations. I relaxed. As my mind wandered, the colour returned to the room. In that split-second of time, again less time than it takes to read these sentences, Jeff had crossed the distance and was thundering punches into me. The grey curtain dropped back instantly. I moved. As I moved I could hear the crowd roaring.

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I admire Trudeau for working so hard to become good at boxing. I respect Trudeau for confronting that ‘Shiny Pony’ image that many Canadians had of him. For in confronting it, Trudeau understood the dark secret at the heart of Canada’s psyche – we adore fighting. Forget the ‘decent, UN peacekeepers, slightly boring but dependable fellow’ self-image that Canadians have of themselves. In our communal soul there is a dark corner that is forever Don Cherry. Susanna Moodie wrote about it as one of her first impressions on coming to Canada in the 1830s. Our very nation was formed in the trenches of the First World War and Vimy Ridge. There our reputation as brutal fighters was the stuff of horrific legends. As for our national games of hockey and lacrosse, there are simply no other sports that allow participants to stop, fight and then carry on playing. It is unheard of in anywhere else in the world. In Canadian-made sports it is

simply shrugged off as part of the action. Canadian society then is a mirror of boxing: lots of good manners and decency on the surface, but scrape away the layers and there is a brutal, animalistic streak at the centre of its soul.

Of course this is not true for all-Canadians all of the time. But it is powerful force in the Canadian soul that you ignore at your peril. The crowd was like that last Saturday night. In other sports you stick with your team win or lose. Fight fans are not like that. They love their winners. When Brazeau entered the hall that night, nearly everyone there loved him. When he left after being defeated there were few people who shook his hand. At some level, I think Trudeau knew that and realized that he could never have a successful career as a politician unless he took on that visceral Canadian sense of thuggishness and won it over.

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After the fight was over, Jeff came immediately over to me and shook my hand. I had won the fight, but we had trained together, liked each other and promised that we would drink whiskies to toast each other's relatives who had died from cancer, whatever the result. We did. It was for me the best part of the evening.

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