

## **An Introductory Look at Shadowboxing**

*By Stephen Logan*

### **Introduction**

Shadowboxing was secured as a staple of a boxers training routine by 1928 when the famous boxer Philadelphia Jack O'Brien wrote, "I can't overemphasize the importance of shadowboxing as an aid in the attainment of proper form and endurance" (O'Brien, 181). Slightly more than a century earlier in 1825, an author known only as 'A Celebrated Pugilist' penned a treatise on boxing that gave somewhat specific instructions on solo training. It read, "When you have not a friend to spar with, a glass to stand before you will set you right with regard to the securest attitude, and you may strike and practice the lessons before it. The same use may be made of a candle, if you stand between its light and the wall, on which your shadow may be observed" (Anon., 17). Nearly every boxing manual both old and new make reference to solo training, establishing its tradition in the boxing world.

The value of shadowboxing can be seen in parallels to other martial arts such as katas, forms, demonstrations, and other individual exercises. The concept of solo training is for the most part accepted as standard in the martial arts community, but the process of *how* to shadowbox and the benefits of doing so may need clarification.

### **Benefits**

The regular practice of shadowboxing directly relates to the various physical aspects of sparring and combat. The anonymous pugilist mentioned that a boxer "may strike and practice the lessons" (anon., 17). O'Brien's advice was to, "Perfect a given motion by endless repetition" (O'Brien, 181). On a very basic level, shadowboxing can be used to drill single maneuvers as well as to practice complex sets and the combination of striking, footwork, and defense. The benefits of regular shadowboxing include improved endurance, accuracy, and proper form. Al Bernstein writes, "When you shadowbox, you are practicing punches so that you will throw them correctly in a fight or in sparring sessions" (Bernstein, 57). In the context of an actual match, these skills translate into a better prepared fighter.

The benefits of shadowboxing also lend themselves to the mental processes of a fighter as well. Fighters who genuinely shadowbox and experiment with footwork and combinations have a deeper understanding of each maneuver and its role in wider view of

their striking game. Chuck Bodak suggests, "...concentrate on throwing sequences of 3 to 5 punches. Work on combinations that have been giving you trouble in sparring sessions" (Bodak, 12). The lesson that Bodak is trying to teach is that of experimentation. Shadowboxing is a crucial mental exercise for both novice and advanced fighters. Proficient shadow boxers possess the capacity for adaptability with their techniques, which is undeniably the mark of a successful fighter.

## **Safety**

As with any drill or exercise, common sense is first and foremost. Executing strikes without a pad or partner to absorb the force opens up the risk of hyperextension. In his book *Boxing and Medicine*, Dr. Robert Cantu states, "nearly all injuries of the elbow are associated with hyperextension of that joint" (Cantu 84). If a punch is thrown full or close to full power and speed without connecting with a target, there is a chance the joint will snap too far and bend past its capacity, possibly damaging tendons and ligaments. Cantu notes that this safety concern exists in sparring as well. "The at-risk position again occurs with a missed punch as well as a misdirected blow" (Cantu 84). Dr. Cantu finally concludes by stating that statistics show that the majority of hyperextensions happen in shadowboxing while far less occur in actual matches (Cantu 82).

Always shadowbox with the intention of maintaining and improving form. Throw your strikes with speed but only commit yourself to 75-80% extension to reduce the risk of injury to your joints. This also requires a fighter to work on the recovery of his or her strikes, not just the execution. The old martial arts adage, 'strike with 80%, retract with 100%' applies to shadowboxing as well.

## **The Process**

I have chosen to structure examples of shadowboxing in the form of three levels. The levels themselves are arbitrary and are just meant to illustrate progression.

1. *Introductory shadowboxing*: Beginning shadowboxing drills include a variety of different drills. Students perform footwork drills in the mirror to check stance, guard, and body positioning. Footwork can be linear, angular, and circular, and can be both offensive and defensive. The key to progressing in introductory shadowboxing is to drill and perfect fundamentals while gaining a kinesthetic feel for your own role in your striking game. New fighters shadowbox in the mirror to use themselves as targets to make sure each strike is accurate. Isolating techniques from combinations and doing sets of reps (such as 30x jabs, 30x crosses, then 30x jab, cross combos) is also crucial. Progression drills (1, 1-2, 1-2-3, 1-2-3-4) are also used to break down combinations and teach them more in depth.

2. *Intermediate shadowboxing*: Intermediate students have progressed from rote drilling to shadowboxing as if responding to a real opponent. More emphasis is placed on both evasive and engaging footwork, defending against probable attacks (i.e. adding parries, soaks, and evasions into combinations), combining ranges, and integrating their striking game. The key principle that guides shadowboxing at all levels is creativity and being

able to visualize a realistic opponent and respond appropriately. Examples include but are by no means limited to: Experimenting with multiple responses to a single attack (i.e. 3 responses to a cross), drilling counter attacks, and testing different entrances with punches, kicks, and feints.

3. *Advanced shadowboxing*: Advanced shadowboxing focuses on more complex concepts in combat arts such as responding to 360 degrees of attacks, dealing with multiple attackers, working in constricting environmental factors (such as narrow hallways or shadowboxing in the context of an icy sidewalk) or fusing techniques from multiple arts. Examples include: Combining Muay Thai and Silat techniques, taking an opponent to and getting up from the ground, working locks, guntings, and destructions into your striking.

The guiding principle behind shadowboxing is creativity. Good shadow boxers improvise, explore concepts, experiment with different techniques, and are always trying new ideas, all the while fine tuning their skills. To quote Chuck Bodak, “An exercise of the intellect is the first callisthenic you must perform in your quest to master boxing” (Bodak, 1). Whether you are practicing Muay Thai, Kali, Brazilian Jiu Jitsu or any other style, the spirit of experimentation is the building block of a versatile fighter.

### **Works Cited**

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