

Sheffield Boxing Centre

Glyn Rhodes might be better known for his role in the professional side of the sport, but there's no denying that both amateur and non-contact boxing are thriving at his busy gym, Sheffield Boxing Centre, and this is why we wanted to speak to him.

Tucked away from the tram route in deepest Hillsborough, a room adorned with little more than a couple of benches and some well-worn punch bags is the last place you'd expect to find large group of women indulging in a punishing post-work exercise. But this is a scene that has become typical of Tuesday and Thursday nights at Sheffield Boxing Centre, where women are shunning an evening on the sofa to work out under the ubiquitous eye of Coach Glyn Rhodes (below). "I put a list out for women interested in doing boxing classes and you wouldn't believe how many names went down," says Glyn. "It's hard, but here's no point in having it easy. If you want it easy, join Fitness First. People walk out of here sweating and feeling like they're dying and you've just got to read our motto, 'If you want to do it you'll find a way. If you don't, you'll find an excuse.'



The no-frills circuit classes have transformed many of the women's attitudes to fitness. "We've got a girl that has lost nearly five stone," Glyn says. "The women love it; they must do because they keep coming down." With over thirty women attending some of the sessions, Glyn might want to consider finding bigger premises. The Burton Street Project has been home to Sheffield Boxing Centre for thirteen years. Glyn and Phil Wood (who looks after the amateur side of things) dedicate all their time to keeping the gym going. "We survive by begging, stealing and borrowing..." he laughs, "Mainly stealing."

The gym is quiet when I arrive. A couple of lively youngsters are leaving and Glyn should be savouring a moment's peace, but that doesn't look likely. His phone rings constantly (the theme tune from Rocky, obviously) and his one paid member of staff, Terry, is chatting away about cleaning products. "I couldn't cope with having a regular day where I know what I'm doing," says Glyn. "I get up in the morning and look at what I've got to do and it never works out. Along the way things happen that you wouldn't dream would happen and that's what I like about my life; you never know who's gonna ring you up, walk through the door or turn up at your house, it's always interesting."

When asked if he has time for anything besides boxing, Glyn answers: "Well, I get up, fill the dishwasher... then don't turn it on. My missus says if it was something to do with boxing I'd do it straight away, but if she asked me to put the washing on or empty the dishwasher, I'll forget. Am I punch drunk?" If he is, he hides it well. Glyn appreciates boxing's role in keeping youngsters on the straight and narrow. "I left school at sixteen, wandered around for a while and did nothing. At seventeen I started boxing down at Brendan's (Ingle's Wincobank gym) and I've never looked back. When I was seventeen I was a bit of a scallywag to say the least." From the glint in his eye, there's a sense that this is something of an understatement.

Glyn's boxing career took in 95 amateur and professional bouts. While he gained his journeyman status taking fights at a moment's notice, he admits that he held himself back at times, and he wants his boxers to learn from these mistakes. "I look back at my record and the guys I lost to and it wasn't because they were better than me, but because I was a fool to myself. I wouldn't train. When Brendan was telling me, I just didn't pay attention. I did everything on a wing and a prayer and I regret that. When I look down my record there are guys who beat me who didn't have as much ability as me but were fitter. It's really depressing. Even at 47 I look back and think 'Oh god, I should have beat that kid,' so that's the point I try and get across to the kids. I've heard every excuse in the world. I used them myself with Brendan."

While Sheffield Boxing Centre isn't located in the most rundown area of the city, there is still a strong need for financial support. "It's a shame that everyone who works here is voluntary," says Glyn. "You look at it now and it's quiet, but I know that in an hour's time it'll be mad. There'll be kids everywhere; it'll be a complete nuthouse. I've got ex-boxers like Simon Chambers and other people who just want to be involved. It's a shame there's not more funding for people to do what we do. This sport, like football, is a working class sport. On the council estates, like where I come from, kids either play football or box. There should be more help from the government for this sort of facility."

The gym does more than its fair share for the local community too, with numerous sponsored activities, exhibitions at local prisons and many other fundraising schemes under its belt. "For some reason a lot of people regard boxing as violence," says Glyn. "But it's the kids hanging round the streets who think they've something to prove, who want to have a fight and show off. This place should be open all day. The guys who have just left are kids, a lot of them girls. They're not in mainstream school. Someone could be paid to train the kids and look after them and set them on the right road. Give them a bit of discipline. You don't want them hanging round on the streets."

I ask if he thinks there's any chance of the situation improving. "I think eventually funding will happen," he replies, optimistically. "People will say that this is the kind of facility we need. If you tell kids these days to go to Ponds Forge (a local sports venue) or somewhere, the little scallywags aren't going to go, but anyone can walk through that door. We get all sorts of people here. There needs to be something like this on every street corner."



Sheffield Boxing Centre's regular amateur shows always draw in the locals

The walls at the Boxing Centre are plastered with photos of kids of all ages, past and present, having the time of their lives in far-flung places, and a glance at the fitness timetable for the centre suggests there's little time for Glyn and Phil to relax. While there are opportunities to travel and enjoy the success of some of the centre's protégés, are there are days when even they want to stay in bed? "Some days I walk up those stairs and I don't feel like being here, but as soon as that door opens and I hear that beep, I put my brave face on. We all have good days and bad days, but if people walk in through that door and I'm not on top of the world, they're not gonna want to come and look at me feeling sorry for myself, that's just how you've got to be, get on with it. I've got people relying on me - look around you at the pictures of all the kids who come here."

Would he have done anything else with his life? "I'm a joiner by trade, but I'm lucky enough to do what I do here. I'm either reading boxing, watching boxing or I'm in here or at a show. I'm here seven days a week. My missus understands that. I was doing this when I met her and I'll be doing it after she kicks me out! Then I'll be living under the ring in a sleeping bag. I've not got a bad word to say about boxing. Through boxing I've been everywhere. Places I'd never have gone, places I wouldn't want to go again...

My missus thinks it's all glamorous, that you pack your bags and go off all over the world. We went to Lithuania, that's not somewhere you'd take your family on holiday – not where we went anyway. I had a kid not long back who boxed in Hungary in a one horse town. We've just got back from Miami and Las Vegas with the kids; that was one of the better trips. You get to travel Britain as well, We're all over the place."

And the triumphs from his stable make it all worthwhile, of course. "It's brilliant when you see those two kids up there. (Points at posters of John 'Fireball' Fewkes and Ross Burkinshaw) They've gone from being little scrawny eleven year olds to having a deal with Frank Maloney. It makes it all worthwhile. You have your heartbreaks along the way and things have happened... bad decisions or whatever. Kids have come and kids have gone. One of the things you have to make sure you don't do is talk to them as if they're still kids. Up to the age of about fifteen you're kind of a father figure but when they get to seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, they're men."

Glyn is endlessly enthusiastic about his home town's boxing heritage. "I started in a good era in Sheffield," he says. "I started boxing as an amateur when there was no boxing here to speak of. Then Brendan got Bomber Graham and it just went from there. It was in its infancy and it just got bigger and bigger. I boxed on a lot of undercards to Herol at Sheffield City Hall at some of these big shows. Now we've got World Champions in Sheffield – Clinton Woods amongst others, but back in the day there was only Herol Graham. He was the man. A lot of people aspired to be like him, myself included. Naseem Hamed was a clone of Herol Graham and a lot of people in Sheffield say it's the Brendan Ingle style of boxing, you know, the hands down thing. Herol Graham started all that. Before Herol came to Sheffield, nobody was doing it. And then he came along and he opened a lot of doors for a lot of people and a lot of people owe him a lot."

Asked about his favourite local boxer, Glyn answers straight away. "Clinton Woods. He's a grafter. He's a down to earth kid and he shows you what you can do. When I was training Clinton - and I don't think he'll mind me saying this – nobody at the time when he was training here, in their wildest dreams, would have thought that one day he'd be World Champion. I take my hat off to the kid. I was in his corner when he boxed Mark Baker in London on the undercard to Herol Graham and Vinny Pazienza. Look what you can achieve just by getting your head down and getting on with it. He's not that flamboyant type. He's a good, solid and honest. Whereas other guys let their mouths run away with them and try and be flash, Clinton's achieved. He's had his setbacks and his defeats, but he's plugged away and shown determination. Too many fighters these days get a loss and go off the rails. For instance, Clinton lost to David Storey a long time ago and he regrouped and pulled himself back together and he's World Champion. I think boxers should look up to him more than anyone else."

The relationship between amateur and professional boxing can be a touchy subject, but Glyn appreciates the importance of amateur boxing in keeping the sport alive. "Going professional is a full time job. It's the hardest game in the world. A lot of kids nowadays have to go to work, then go home and then come training. A kid walks through the door after a long day's graft as a bricklayer or whatever and walks through the door to me saying 'I've got you a fight tonight, you're boxing in Leeds.' It's hard and we need to make it easier for kids to stay amateur if that's what they want to do. It's great to see kids winning amateur titles and that should propel them.

"Personally the biggest highs as a trainer I've had are when Herol Graham fought for the world title and Richie fought for the World Title in Atlantic City. Just to be around for that sort of thing and to train a kid for the British title was brilliant. But all of that aside, what I regard as my big moments are when a kid comes into your gym, like Fewkey and Burkinshaw, they're only eleven year old kids, don't know their left foot from their right, and here they are now. It's taken ten years, but Brendan used to tell me it takes ten years to make a good fighter. I used to think ten years? I'll not be in boxing in ten years! And here I am now, 47 years old and still involved in boxing."



Working hard...

I ask if there is something he can immediately recognise in a boxer that tells him they'll go far. "It takes a long time," says Glyn. "It's something you've got to develop. You've got to work at it week after week and month after month. You get kids walk in the gym that are a little bit gifted and get there a little bit faster than the other guy, but so much can happen along the way. We've had kids come in this gym and they get a girlfriend and they forget about their career or they have a drink. When I get kids who've come right through the amateurs and had good amateur careers it gives me more satisfaction even than going to Atlantic City with Bomber. That was great but it took ten years to get him in that position too."

And why this sport over any other? "Boxing is the highest game of one-on-one that you're ever going to play in your life. It's me and you; we've got no weapons. The only thing I've got is what's in my head. Have I trained right? You know, a fighter that's fit will often beat a fighter with more ability. A fighter who's mentally prepared will often beat a fighter who's physically prepared. For me it's the greatest game in the world."