

# TRAINING A BOXER

BY ERIC WULF

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A FIGHT to a finish between two pugilists grips the nerves of the spectators as does no other contest in the world of sport. Many sensitive people either refuse to witness such a spectacle or at least never repeat the experience. Noses are broken, teeth are battered out, and knuckles are shattered; blood flows, men are 'knocked out,' and not infrequently in the history of the sport a contestant's heart has failed to stand the strain and he has never risen from the floor. Every pugilist naturally enters the ring determined to win, but the best and the most intelligent of them by no means take unmixed pleasure in their profession, and as they grow older their mental distress before each public exhibition generally increases.

On the other hand, a prize fight unquestionably demands a coördination of mind, will, and body more perfect than in any other sport. Each contestant must recognize instantaneously the tactics and purposes of his opponent; he must accommodate himself in a fraction of a second to new situations; he must seize an advantage with the speed of lightning. Twenty minutes — perhaps ten or even five minutes — of supreme physical, mental, and moral effort, and the match is settled. But for weeks previously even a veteran pugilist has prepared himself persistently and unremittingly for these brief minutes.

In what does a champion's preparation consist? I recently determined to answer this question, and with that

in view betook myself to the little town of Wolgast in Pomerania, where Kurt Prenzel had set up his training-quarters.

After a tedious journey, I reached the little country station late in the evening. The only men I discovered there were two mediæval night-watchmen who were patrolling with pikes and fire trumpets the dark and deserted street. All Wolgast that was not abed at 8 P.M. was attending the thirteenth anniversary of the local Tavern-Keepers' Association. That popular function was being held in the largest hall in the village, which might perhaps accommodate one hundred people, but was only moderately filled. In the midst of the company sat Prenzel, surrounded by his training associates, the centre of universal admiration. In the first place, he is a powerful-looking man; in the second, he wore clothes of the very latest city fashion; and third, he was drinking *Sekt!* Such a triple event was unparalleled and would be the topic of conversation for many days to come.

I soon left the hall with the hero of the evening and his companions, for a champion in training must keep early hours. Prenzel ordinarily retires at ten o'clock and sleeps in the winter time until 8 A.M. — ten hours' unbroken slumber. At twenty minutes after eight the next morning we gathered in a room reserved for us at the Hotel Zur Post. After a breakfast consisting of half a cup of bean coffee with milk and sugar, drunk slowly

while standing up and strolling about, much as people sip a glass of the waters at Wiesbaden, we were ready, by half-past eight, for the 'morning's work.' The townspeople know the hour to the minute, just as they do the time when the milk wagon rounds the corner; and when we left the hotel curious heads were protruding from many a window.

The champion walked ahead, a couple of steps in advance of his two boxing partners and a handy man, and last of all came the trainer, in order to keep an eye on the party. All wore knee breeches, woolen sweaters, sporting-jackets, caps, and leather gloves. The latter are important, for a boxer always wears something on his hands. We had hardly passed the last houses of the village when conversation ceased abruptly, every man suddenly looked serious and businesslike, and the boxers, drawing a deep breath, began to make quick, thrusting passes in the air. This is shadow boxing, which is considered a very important feature of the training. It is a physical expression of intense mental concentration. Each man visualizes an opponent, sees him like a physical form, parries his blows, strikes at him with all his might, and dodges a vicious counter as alertly as if a real antagonist stood before him. Ten minutes of this sort of thing was followed by a sprint of three quarters of a mile to limber the legs and strengthen the wind.

Proper breathing, which few understand, is the very foundation of successful pugilism. Without it all other qualities come to naught. It is not right breathing to expand the chest with a sudden inhalation — the air must be drawn in evenly until it fills every pore and aperture of the lungs, and must be completely exhaled in the same unbroken rhythm. Breathing, and indeed all physical effort, must start

from the diaphragm. This is the centre of strength. A person who has forgotten how to breathe properly, or has never mastered the knack, requires years of practice to do so spontaneously and without effort.

We jogged along for an hour cross-country, through thickets and over stone walls and fences. No one turned aside for a stream or puddle, and no one spoke a word.

As soon as we reached quarters again the trainer carried Prenzel off to his room like an anxious mother, stirred up the fire in the stove, and rubbed down his perspiring body with damp linen towels. Then he broke two fresh eggs — laid that very morning — into a glass, beat them up, and added a drop or two of the very best old port wine. When Prenzel had drunk this he declared that he was hungry and wanted breakfast. The latter consisted of two poached eggs on boiled ham, a slice of thickly buttered bread, cold fillet of beef, and, last of all, half a buttered roll. With this he drank hot milk. I shall not waste words trying to describe how excellent and how palatable that meal was. The plump hostess of the Hotel Zur Post was conscious of the weighty responsibility that rested upon her — all hostesses who are good cooks are fat and wear dazzling-white aprons. She scoured the country to get the very best meat procurable for the 'gentlemen pugilists,' and her milk and butter came from cows fed with hay instead of turnips, in order that they might contain plenty of vitamine A.

There was no more work that morning. Each one amused himself according to his taste — reading, writing letters, or strolling through the town. At one o'clock we all met again for our midday meal, and I noticed with some surprise that all of us already had voracious appetites. Soups are banned

as unprofitable stomach-fillers. We proceeded directly to the only main course — roast beef and string beans, with a moderate portion of potatoes. For dessert we had a very sweet home-made compote. Sugar tones up the muscles and professional boxers ordinarily take it in combination with stewed fruit.

As soon as each finished his unusually large portion of rare roast beef and his moderate allowance of vegetables, he lay down for a siesta. We assembled promptly at three o'clock for the afternoon's work. Prenzel had erected a ring in the tower of an old city wall that now lies just outside the town in a clump of ivy-covered trees. The light and the winter sun flooded the place from every side. The boxers donned their ring attire, even rubber protectors for their teeth. Prenzel first worked with the bag for fifteen minutes. Under his short, sharp strokes the ball rattled against the wooden sounding-board like the cracking of a machine gun, interspersed now and then with bomblike explosions whenever he gave it a right or left swing. Punching the bag trains the eye. It is a critical test of quick vision, speedy reaction, and muscular control invariably to hit the bag as it dodges with incredible celerity from one point to another. During the fifteen minutes Prenzel did not score a single miss.

Then they shifted to regular boxing. After a few minutes' sparring with the lighter of his boxing partners, Prenzel put in some heavier work with his second massive companion. It was no child's play, as the big brown spots and abrasions that covered Prenzel's body testified. Before long an unparried head-blow made him spit blood. Perspiration was flowing from his opponent's body in streams when the trainer stopped the last round, but Prenzel was not even out of breath,

and immediately started a series of Swedish gymnastics that began with lying prostrate on the floor with his arms under his head and rising erect five times in quick succession.

After a tepid bath, Prenzel was massaged. This massaging is one of the most important features of training, and is intended to make the muscles supple again after they have become cramped and stiff with intense exertion. As Prenzel lay upon the massaging-table his relaxed muscles were as soft as down cushions, but the moment he held them tense they felt like bundles of steel wire to the hand.

When the regular work of the afternoon was over, we walked into town and each ate a liberal portion of genuine home-made ice cream at the little candy-shop. At seven o'clock we gathered for supper at the Hotel: Each man was served a thick broiled beef-steak, with tartare sauce, and a glass of hot milk. There is an old controversy as to whether beef or mutton is the best for athletes. I have heard that the boat races between Oxford and Cambridge are also contests between two parties who swear respectively by beef and by mutton. Prenzel swears by beef.

After supper we played a few games of billiards, but as soon as it struck ten the trainer sent the champion off to bed. The two men sleep in the same room — in fact, the trainer hardly leaves his charge a moment. He not only orders and superintends his physical exercise and his eating, but sees to it sharply that he does not smoke or drink. His mind is kept constantly on the thought of winning. Indeed, it is a Spartan discipline. He is allowed no outside social diversions whatsoever. Luther's dictum about wine, women, and song means nothing during these four weeks of stern endurance. Prize-fighting is a hard, self-denying, Spartan profession.

# INSIDE THE FIGHTER'S MIND

BY JEAN PRÉVOST

[*M. Prévost, who must not be confused with the more famous older novelist of the same name, belongs to the modernistic school sometimes characterized in France by the simple initials 'NRF' of the Nouvelle Revue Française, their favorite organ. Wit, daring, and a love for exaggerated and often strained figures characterize the writers of this group, among whom are counted André Gide, Jules Romains, Paul Morand, and the late Marcel Proust.*]

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As he got out of bed in the morning, Pierre said to himself that this was the day of the fight, and the first shock of the idea set his legs to shaking. To limber up he began to go through his favorite exercise: naked and with his eyes shut, he slowly rehearsed every attitude and every blow, enjoying the sensation of his curbed strength, calling up memories. His legs got back their swift and certain movements. A slight pain in the armpit under whichever arm he stretched showed the harshness with which he had been trained. Every part of his torso, whether extended as he lunged or bent as he dodged, warmed his heart again. The thought of all the blows that he knew brought back ease and verve to his body.

What they call shadow boxing does more than increase speed and make the various blows and parries instinctive. Almost always it fills a man with fanciful pride, with that indispensable excess of confidence for which trainers and records and fetishes are not enough. Pierre underwent this illusion like anyone else, but because each day he felt his muscles with a keener curiosity, he thought himself intelligent and superior to the rest. He dressed, ate breakfast, talked a little, and waited without uneasiness. For the moment his opponent

was only a vague name which he had half forgotten.

As he went to the prize ring he encountered the name, written above his own on the posters, in letters that seemed a little too square, and he even thought he could read it in a druggist's show-window. For an athlete in training fear no longer hampers the movements, but the viscera are not so easily purged of cowardice. Pierre felt his stomach contracting and began to whistle through his teeth like a man who feels a kind of contempt for himself. He plucked up his courage as best he might and hurried on.

First on the platform, he sat looking at his feet, uneasy because he had to stay motionless and feel himself stared at from behind. He was glad to see his opponent climb up to divide the curiosity of the crowd. They threw off their robes. A big man in a black coat made an announcement from a platform. A clasp of indifferent hands. The two men looked at each other — a fine moment.

As two fists squared opposite him, Pierre became acutely conscious of his whole body and felt less sure of his equilibrium when confronted by this stocky fighter who would certainly have the best of it in the clinches. As they shook hands — rather high — two