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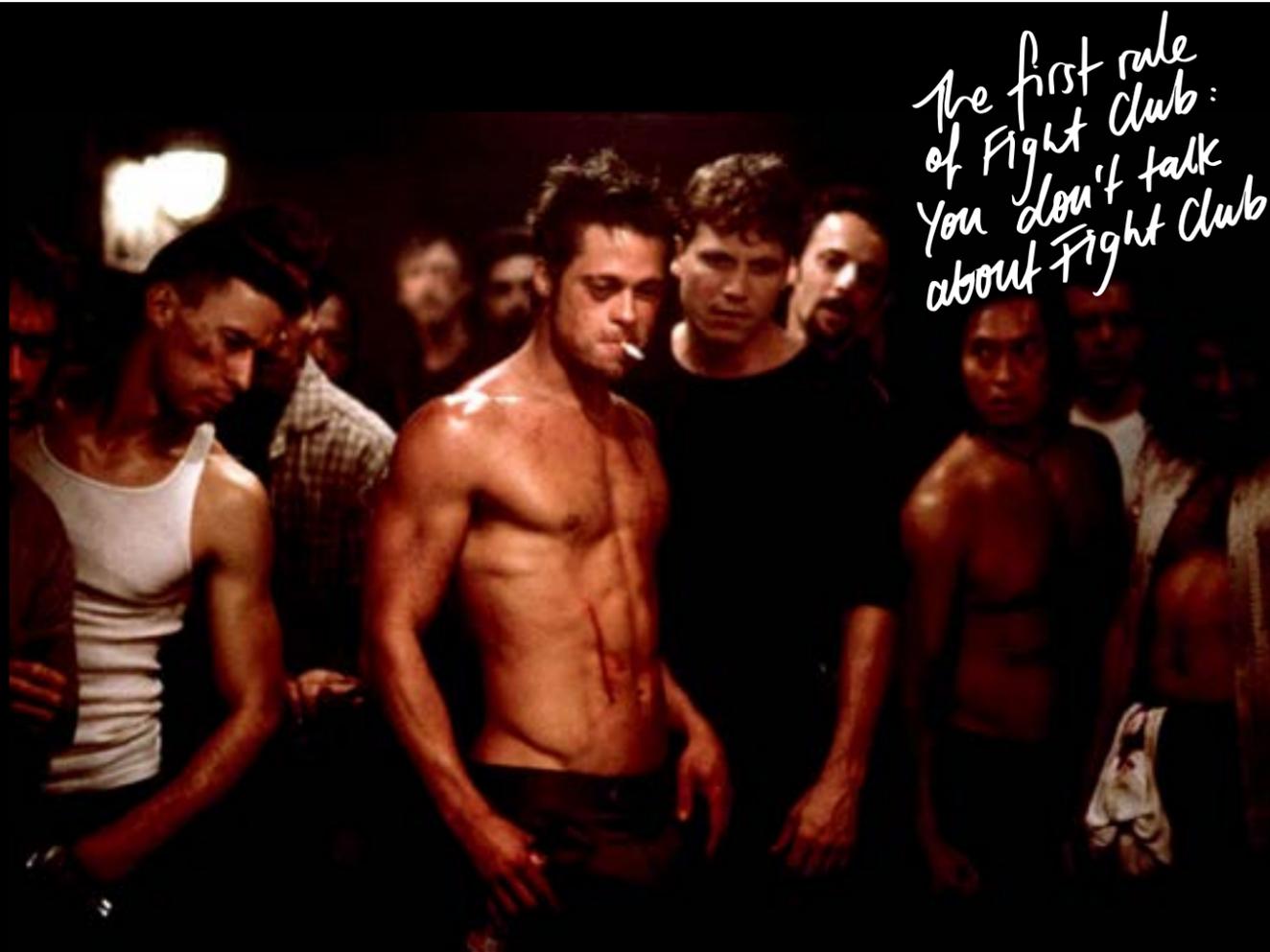
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THE WORLD'S
MOST LOVED
LOGO



The first rule of Fight Club: You don't talk about Fight Club



CORPORATE FIGHT CLUB

ORDINARY BUSINESSMEN *and women, who have never thrown a PUNCH in their lives, are entering the BOXING RING to battle it out – while black-tie diners cheer them on. Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to a most unusual fight club.*

WORDS IAN LLOYD NEUBAUER

FIGHT CLUB, BRAD PITT (CENTER), 1999. TM AND COPYRIGHT © 20TH CENTURY FOX FILM CORP. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. / HEADPRESS

PEOPLE *regularly tell me their PRODUCTIVITY at work is heightened, that they've WON promotions they had been CHASING for years without success, that their overall ENERGY LEVELS are higher than ever.*

Ding, ding, ding! The bell rings and a boxer rushes bull-like from her corner, scoring an effective psychological blow against her opponent before offloading a machine-gun of jabs. Faces contorted, knuckles clenched white, a group of female spectators yell at the contestants to “smash” each other and “bust” their faces in a scene more befitting of the ancient Roman Colosseum than the grand ballroom of the Sofitel Sydney Wentworth hotel.

The match is an oddity, not so much for the venue or the gender of the fighters but because three months beforehand, neither woman had ever thrown a punch.

Nevertheless they're fighters through and through – members of a small but growing fraternity of highly disciplined, achievement-hungry professionals swept up by the bittersweet appeal of the Academy Fight Experience.

Part-boot camp, part-corporate entertainment promotion, the program puts participants through 12 weeks of rigorous after-hours and weekend training, at the end of which they do battle against like-minded individuals in sanctioned boxing matches-cum-black-tie events attended by their bosses, colleagues, families and friends.

“What am I doing here? I guess it started as a fitness thing but then it turned into something else,” says 34-year-old internship consultant Domonique Delgado after emerging bruised and battered but in a highly elated state from the ring. “It has definitely made me more confident.”

“I'd never got into a fight in my life, so I always wanted to challenge myself in a combative environment. I wanted to know if I had what it takes,” adds 34-year-old Forex trader David Grant.



TRAINING DAZE

Rewind one week, to a chilly autumn evening in the gritty Sydney harbourside suburb of Woolloomooloo. A line of homeless and hard-up folk forms at a soup kitchen in front of the Police Citizens Youth Club where the faint thump of boxing pads resonates through the air. The sound accelerates in volume and rhythm as I walk into the club's gym, where 20 or so men and women in their late twenties to early forties undergo a series of punishing drills. Holding court in the centre of the room is their leader Leon Scanlon, an amateur boxer and fitness trainer who co-founded the Academy Fight Experience in 2009.

“Before we started this business, my partner Rob and I were working as trainers for a global corporate boxing promoter based in Singapore,” he says.

“We had 20 fighters ready to go, but three weeks before the event the company pulled out and left them high and dry. So Rob and I went into business mode, found a new venue and staged the event on our own.”

Since that day, Leon and Rob have, to quote the cult 1999 movie *Fight Club*, turned 240 everyday men and women from wads of cookie dough into wood.

It's not uncommon for their fighters – some of whom train up to five days a week and abstain from drinking, smoking and junk food for the entire duration of the program – to witness complete overhauls of their physique.

“Every year I train for the City2Surf [fun run in Sydney], but it's nowhere near as intense as the training that has led up to this,” says 41-year-old business development director John Rayment.

“I've lost 10kg in 12 weeks. This is the lightest I have been in a decade.”

Yet the most significant transformation – one that applies equally to those who start the program in good shape – is not physical but mental. Inasmuch as the Academy Fight Experience can be understood as not just a boot camp but a personal-development course writ large; the contact sport equivalent of a public speaking workshop where black eyes and bruised ribs are part and parcel of what many describe as a life-changing journey. >



"I had this one guy who'd been bullied since school and suffered from really bad depression," says Leon. "He had a really negative outlook on life and basically saw himself as a victim. On top of all that, he was quite overweight and unfit."

"The transformation this guy went through was amazing. He lost 18kg of body fat and went from having no self-confidence at all to the point where everyone else in the class looked up to him. He ended up losing his fight, but since then, everything else in life he's won."

"People regularly tell me their productivity at work is heightened, that they've won promotions they had been chasing for years without success, that their overall energy levels are higher than ever. I can name probably 50 people who've told me that outside of getting married or the birth of their children, training and fighting with us has been the best thing they've done in their entire lives."

THE CONTENDERS

Of all the corporate boxers I meet that evening, none seems more out of place, but also strangely in the right place, than 29-year-old Manja De Jeu.

A former Bonds underwear model with the physique to match, she spends her days working as a social worker with children who by unfortunate circumstance are no longer with their parents, but in the government's care.

"My job is quite intense," says Manja.

"Most of the children I work with have been



physically or sexually abused so they have massive behavioural problems. Foster families can't possibly manage them so they live in special homes where carers like me raise them. It's a 24/7 job. And it's very emotionally draining."

To relieve her work-related stress, Manja took up boxercise at her local gym. Seeing how much she gained from the sport, her trainer sent her to try one of Leon's classes in Woolloomooloo.

"I fell in love with boxing straight away because it takes fitness to a whole new level," she says. "It's not just about throwing punches, it's like playing a game of chess. It's about knowing when to duck, when to weave, when to advance and when to retreat."

"I enjoyed it so much I became a corporate boxer and I've had three fights so far. The first I won by a unanimous judges' decision. The second I won by technical knockout in the first round, but the third one I lost by a 2-1 decision. Some people think I should've won and I really want a rematch with her. But this Saturday I'm fighting another girl."

That girl is 30-year-old quantity surveyor Linda Lodge. A solidly built Irishwoman with a devilish grin, she carries an 18kg weight advantage over Manja and the psychological benefit of winning her first and only fight.

"I had never done anything like it before so I was pretty nervous when I stepped into the ring," says Linda of her first match.

"I had plenty of friends there to support me though I was nervous as all hell. I remember my sister looking up at me shaking her head because she'd seen the boxer before me get knocked out."

"But once the match started all the nerves disappeared. I had a significant advantage as I was taller than my opponent and had longer reach. That's what won it for me in the end. If you have reach in boxing, you can be deadly."

And that's exactly how Manja, who's all arms and legs with a reach exceeding that of most female boxers, aims to rain on Linda's parade.

"I'm well aware Manja is more experienced than me and that she takes her boxing very seriously. She's pretty fast with those one-two punch combinations," concedes Linda.

"I'm going in as the underdog but I want to come out with a win. So I'll be taking nothing for granted and going in with all guns blazing. I have a pretty big right-hand punch on me, and if she cops a couple of those, I think it'll knock her."

When I convey Linda's comments to Manja, she cocks her head back and smirks à la Ivan Drago in *Rocky IV*. "Well, that's her opinion," she remarks.

"But there's no doubt in my mind. I will definitely win this fight."



The second rule of Fight Club: You don't talk about Fight Club

FIGHT NIGHT

When I arrive for the big night, Leon is a bunch of nerves. One of his fighters pulled out at the 11th hour due to a nagging groin injury, leaving him with the near impossible task of finding an evenly matched ring-in. The development has also left Leon financially exposed. Participants in the Academy Fight Experience don't pay training or ring fees. Instead, they commit to selling 10 dinner packages that include entry fees, a three-course meal and generously flowing wine and beer – and which sell from AU\$220 to AU\$300 depending on their proximity to the ring.

"It's hard for me as I've lost two tables and had to scramble like crazy finding another fighter," he says. "But this is pretty common in this game and I have found someone else – an amateur boxer from outside our club. He's more experienced than the corporate boxer who pulled out, but my guy has been very well trained; it'll be a fair fight."

None of this is apparent to the 450 spectators dressed in tuxedos and evening gowns now filling into the hotel's grand ballroom. A conga line of Brazilian dancing girls in elaborate headdresses stream in behind them, followed with bongo players and Capoeira dancers dispensing the pre-show entertainment. Drinks are consumed and spilled, strobe lights flash and dazzle and the anticipation of the fight begins to build.

"It's a great night for the spectators, I think, because a lot of them love the idea of seeing their mates getting beat up," says a volunteer from the North Bondi Surf Life Saving Club – that is the beneficiary of a framed Sydney Roosters rugby jersey signed by the entire team, a boxing glove used by boxing great Muhammad Ali and other collectables that will be auctioned for charity between fights.

Moments before final curtains, I sneak into the change room to access the boxers' frame of mind. Manja and Linda are their usual cocky selves, while restaurateur Dan Sofo, who now faces a significantly more sophisticated opponent than the stockbroker who pulled out, is likewise cool as ice.

"I don't care who I'm fighting. It makes no difference to me," he says.

"Just turning up here – testing my personal boundaries, going to a place I've never been before – is already a huge personal victory. My strategy? Just go in there and smash it up."

By the time I return to the ballroom the first two corporate boxers, business development director John Rayment and IT salesman Chris Thomas, are belting it out in the ring. They



I had plenty of friends there to SUPPORT me though I was NERVOUS as all hell. I remember my sister looking up at me shaking her head because she'd seen the BOXER before me get knocked out.

employ whatever strategy they can muster in their heightened conditions, though mostly throw wild hooks and un-timed jabs at the man standing between them and glory.

"The only difference between this and professional fights is the boxers here don't punch as cleanly or with as much intensity," says judge Damien Wilson.

"But they show a lot of heart. In fact, some of them probably show more heart than the pros because they're being beaten around something savage but still stick it out."

The bell rings after two of the longest minutes in the boxers' lives and they retreat to their corners, shaking like jelly. As the bell tolls again, the boxers return to the centre of the ring for another painful round, punching and pushing with everything they've got.

"The harder you cheer, the harder they hit!" the MC yells into his microphone, whipping the crowd into a blood thirsty frenzy.

When the bell mercifully sounds at the end of the third round, the boxers collapse into a sweat-soaked embrace. John is declared the winner and dedicates the victory to his "lovely wife", after which his opponent thanks his work buddies for attending the fight.

"Remember, ladies and gentlemen," says the MC, reclaiming his microphone, "there are no losers here tonight. But now... what you've all been waiting for..."

The crowd roars with delight as Manja and then Linda separately enter the room to high-energy rock 'n' roll anthems.

"I want a good, clean fight," the MC announces as the boxers touch gloves and return to their corners for a last-minute pep talk with their crew.

Ding, ding, ding! 📣