

“I try to catch them right on the tip of his nose, because I try to punch the bone into the brain”:

Ethical issues working in professional boxing

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Abstract

Boxing can be a brutal sport. At face value, the intention is to win contests by injuring your opponent. The intent of boxers coupled with the serious medical effects of participation suggest it contravenes a number of ethical guidelines for an applied psychologist, including social responsibility, respect of the welfare of people's right and dignity and avoiding harm (American Psychological Association, 2002, see http://www.apa.org/ethics/code2002.html#3_04). With this in mind, applied practitioners wish to avoid opportunities to work in professional boxing based on it being ethically unsound. This article explores some of these issues, drawing on experiences as a consultant working with professional boxers. Case study data is presented on the psychological preparation of boxers.

“I try to catch them right on the tip of his nose, because I try to punch the bone into the brain”:

Ethical issues working in professional boxing consultancy

“I try to catch them right on the tip of his nose, because I try to punch the bone into the brain” (<http://www.best-quotes-poems.com/Mike-Tyson.html>)

Mike Tyson, Former World Heavyweight boxing champion.

With the above in mind, boxing seems a highly unethical sport in which to work. American Psychological Association guidelines on ethics indicate that “Psychologists take reasonable steps to avoid harming their clients/patients, students, supervisees, research participants, organizational clients, and others with whom they work, and to minimize harm where it is foreseeable and unavoidable” (see http://www.apa.org/ethics/code2002.html#3_04). At face value, boxing contravenes these ethical principles in terms of the very nature of the sport: one boxer inflicts injury on the other. In addition, the effects of positively reinforcing a belief that intending to cause injury, as quotations from Mike Tyson illustrate, is acceptable, when ethically, it is not. If these arguments are accepted, then it is unethical for psychologists to work in professional boxing.

This article discusses ethical issues with providing psychological support in boxing. It does so from the insider’s view (Douglas & Carless, 2008) in that the author’s experience in boxing provides insight into the mindset of boxers. I have worked as sport psychology consultant for professional boxers (Lane, 2006) and amateur boxers, whilst previously having competed as a boxer. In disclosing this information, I am making the reader of aware that these experiences have the potential to cloud my judgment. Through self-reflection, I have challenged the notion that I seeking a positive explanation for my involvement in the sport. I do not seek to provide an objective account, but one that details my beliefs on these experiences. I argue that these experiences provide a unique insight into the mindset of a boxer, which in turn helps me address the ethical question on whether I should continue involvement in professional boxing.

Boxing – an intent to injure?

At face value, the aim of boxing¹ is to inflict blows on your opponent and avoid injury yourself by landing more punches than you receive (Donnelly, 1988). Ostensibly other sports such as fencing and the martial arts share the aim to injure your opponent (Zazryn, McCrory, & Cameron, 2008), but does not lead to injury. For example, in fencing, the aim is to land a blow on the target area that would be highly likely to be fatal if protective equipment was not used. In boxing, the direct aim is to land blows on the target area, which in turn means that you inflict as much damage on your opponent as possible, with a knockout epitomizing a clinical victory. Professional boxers are more likely to build a successful career if they can win contests by knockout or stoppages. A boxer's record in terms of percentage knockout record is typically announced before each contest to the audience. Most disturbingly, a boxer can legitimately kill his/her opponent as part of competition (Herrera, 2004). For many reasons, it seems difficult to justify involvement in boxing from ethical perspective (Wildes, 1995).

Proponents of proposing working in boxing is unethical should consider separating the issue of intent to injure from injury figures. If intent is considered independently, boxing and fencing are equally unethical. In injury is considered alone, boxing rates higher than fencing. However, boxing is not at the top of injury-rate list for sports, and much lower than a number of combat sports. Irrefutable evidence points to the potential harm competition in boxers can cause (Herrera, 2004; McCrory, Zazryn, & Cameron, 2007), and not surprisingly, reduced injury is associated with participation in amateur boxing which has more safety checks including larger gloves, head guards and shorter rounds (Loosemore, Knowles, & Whyte, 2007). As a consultant, I have sought to separate the issues of intent from issues of injury. In terms of intent, I have never accepted the notion that boxers seek to intentional injure their opponent. A great deal of this article describes and evaluates work with boxers, and what should be evident is that boxers share many characteristics of serious athletes. As Loosemore et al. indicate, boxing is not necessarily a high-risk sport in terms of injury rates. Even professional boxing ranks low in terms of injury rates when compared to a number of contact

¹ At this point it is worth distinguishing professional boxing from amateur boxing. Amateur boxers wear head guards and compete in larger gloves. The scoring system between the two codes also effects competition. In amateur boxing, judges sitting at ringside score blows that land on the target area, If 3 out of the 5 judges agree, then a boxer receives a score. In professional boxing, the winner of a round receives 10 points and the loser 9, 8 and so on depending on how the judges perceived the round. The judges assess the winner at the end of the round rather than on a blow-by-blow basis and therefore, the boxer how appears to dominate the round is more likely to receive 10 points. In amateur boxing, a boxer could win the round by scoring one or two points and defend the remainder of the round. In professional boxer, a knockout is scored a 10-9 round and could be 10-8 if the boxer wins the round also.

sports. It is difficult to sustain an argument that boxing is unethical on injury-rates alone.

A key question typically posed to boxers is whether a boxer intends to injure his or her opponent. Autobiographical accounts of boxers consider their sport to be a type of physical chess (Hatton, 2007)- a battle that is as much psychological and tactical, as it is physical. Most people accept the notion that boxers need to be mentally tough to compete. While few boxers use sport psychologists, most boxers recognize the importance of psychology to performance. The late and legendary boxing trainer Cus D'Amato, who steered Floyd Patterson and Mike Tyson to world heavyweight titles once said that "*fights are won and lost in the head*", a statement that bears testament to the importance of psychological factors for performance.

Studies that explore beliefs on what boxers think and feel during competition reveal few indicators of aggression, even among unlicensed professional boxers (Jones, 1997). Interview data with boxers indicates that they identify aspects of skill, emotional control and physical fitness and key factors in determining performance (Devonport, 2006; Hall & Lane, 2001; Lane, 2002). A great deal of work has explored personal constructs boxers believe are associated with success (Butler & Hardy, 1992; Butler, Smith, & Irwin, 1993; Lane & Hall, 2003; Lane & Lane, 2008). If an intention to injury was a prevailing reason for motivation for participating, then it might be reasonable to assume that such a construct might emerge from open-ended interviews. I have used performance profiling with boxers and have not found an indication of an intention to commit injury (Lane, 2006; Lane & Lane, 2008). I have conducted needs analysis work in my consultancy work with professional and amateur boxers, interviewing boxers with high percentage knockout records, and have rarely experienced information that could be construed as an intention to injure.

In my work with boxers, they report participation motives similar to other high-achieving athletes whose aim to win, and injuring the opponent may be a necessary part of that process, but it is not an intention, or one that is conscious. There is, however, there is no getting away from the potential brutality of the sport; other sportsmen and women may 'play' matches but boxers 'fight' them. In a sport where there is only one winner, seeing an opponent struggling physiologically during a contest provides a huge source of encouragement, and boxers look to exploit every weakness or frailty in their opponents. A boxer therefore has to be prepared to inflict injury on their opponent and show no mercy in doing so - a mindset that is subtly different to intending to injure.

When a boxer sees that their opponent is hurt, this is seen as an indicator of goal attainment. As the aim is to win the contest, this may well involve inflicting further damage.

Contrast this with soccer for example where if a player is hurt, the unwritten rule is to stop play. In boxing however, seeing an opponent wince after receiving a body punch acts in a motivating way, and boxers who allow their opponent time to recover are not likely to be successful. Boxers must capitalize on weaknesses of their opponents and any sign of weakness is indicative that victory is possible. Boxers learn to hide when they feel hurt or tired, outwardly presenting a profile of being calm and confident. The boxer places all duty of care of the welfare of his opponent in the referee. An example of a boxer who struggled with this issue is described in case study 1.

Case Study 1: A boxer who would let his opponent recover

One boxer I worked with came to me suggesting that he did not feel his was fulfilling his potential. He indicated that his coach and a number of people closely associated with boxing believed he had huge potential. His win-loss record indicated he had lost more contests that he had won. He further elaborated that he rarely pressed home an advantage and that if he hurt his opponent he would back off rather than seek to finish the contest. He indicated that he had a counter-puncher style. He felt that the reason he lost contests because his opponent won each round marginally.

On one hand, it could be argued that the boxer needed to develop an inner sense of toughness, that he should desensitize himself to the effects of boxing, or in short, learn to be able to inflict punishment on his opponent. An alternative approach, and ethically more acceptable is to suggest that he was letting his opponent control the tempo of the contest. When he hurt his opponent, where there was an opportunity to take the initiative, he would wait, allowing his opponent to recover. Rather than learn to become aggressive and seek to injure his opponent, he needed to learn how to control the pace of the contest. The mindset behind the two approaches differs hugely. As indicated previously, boxers rarely show intent to injure or need to show intent to injure.

The work I did was to explore strategies he needed to employ to compete to be successful. Using the performance profile method, we identified personal constructs associated with success. My approach to develop performance profiles with boxers is to start the conversation of what constitutes an elite or ideal boxer by identifying past or current boxer and then asking them to describe why the boxer is good (see Lane, in press). I also ask the boxer to identify a boxer who is quite good (National Championship level rather than World Championship level) and ask them to contrast the two boxers. What occurs is that the constructs that the boxer believes separate the two boxers are key as to how he evaluates his performance. By starting this process with real boxers rather than fictional standards, the process is less abstract and hence becomes more meaningful to the client.

Once the boxers and performance constructs were identified, the next step was to develop strategies to enhance these, whilst being conscious of addressing the original reason for the consultation. This led to identifying behavioral plans on how to box differently. In essence, his goal was to raise his work rate so that it he attended to internal cues, rather than being reactionary to what his opponent was doing. Through analysis of the counterpunching styles of elite boxers, he identified that they do not wait for opportunity, but are looking to make

opportunities. The difference was subtle but important as he waited for opportunities. I used a combination of psychological skills (Thelwell, 2008) to develop a more consistent pacing strategy to contests so that he competed the entire round.

The first approach was to develop goals for the number of punches he threw in a round. The number of punches set as a goal was identified by watching video of the elite boxers used in the development of the performance profile. Whilst it is more difficult to enact this in sparring and competition, it is much more straightforward to do when shadowboxing, or punch-pad work, or punch bag work. To further support these goals, I videotaped him training, allowing him to count the number of punches thrown and thereby evaluate his goals. Videotaping is preferred to asking the boxer to count the punches thrown, as punch counting is arguably an unhelpful way of approaching sparring and competition. It also allows him to develop a third person perspective of how he looks. By supporting him develop an image of how he looks during training, I asked him to construct images sessions performing and achieving the pre-set goals. Positive self-talk was added to parts of the session where he felt he might revert back to his former style.

I worked with the boxer for several months, re-assessing his confidence on performance profile constructs, along with his general confidence on how he felt he was boxing. Results indicated he felt more confident, and importantly, felt he had a more integrated training schedule in that he was more aware of the relationship between self-paced training sessions such as shadow boxing and bag work and interactive sessions such as sparring. Whilst this led to an improvement in performance and subsequently, he started winning contest, a key part of the issue that took much longer to address was his belief that he would be a successful boxer because he did not feel he had the sufficient mental toughness in terms of being able to give punishment to his opponent. We worked on these core beliefs, but not in terms of wishing to injure his opponent, but on why they occurred in the first place.

Through lengthy discussion, it appeared that the notion he was not tough was something that stemmed coach-athletes interactions, from discussions between other coaches and with information he gleaned from other boxers, family and friends. As a sport psychologist, it is important to be aware of the multiple sources of information that an athlete obtains information from. Importantly, in this instance, his relatively fragile self-esteem was sensitive to critical comments and he internalized negative information on his capability as a fighter rather than challenging it, and rationalizing it, thereby protecting his self-esteem.

The approach to work on specific strategies that address the problem presented coupled with seeking to identify the route of the issue were effective in terms of client satisfaction in terms of his experiences with a sport psychologist and also in terms of performance. Sport psychologists should be cautious regarding evaluating success in terms of objective win-loss records. It is possible that an athlete might improve irrespective of the work of the psychologist; further, an athlete might improve in spite of, rather than because of the sport psychologist. Research indicates sport psychologists should value their clients as a person and judge the effectiveness of work on the extent to which the client has moved forwards in their relationship with the self, and in terms of themselves as an athlete (Andersen, 2006).

Research indicates that successful fighters demonstrate positive emotional profiles before competition (Chapman, Lane, Brierley, & Terry, 1997; Lane, Terry, Karageorghis, & Lawson, 1999). Such studies typically assess emotions an hour before competition and then

compare winners and losers by emotional profiles. The accuracy of these predictions of winners from pre-contest emotions is remarkably high. In one study, it was possible to predict winners with 95% accuracy, albeit in karate (Terry & Slade, 1995). Terry and Slade found anger was associated with winning performance, and Lane et al. found that anger was associated with winning kickboxing performance when it was associated with vigour. Anger link with depression was associated with losing performance. In my work with boxers, I have found that emotional states associated with optimal performance vary between athletes. The notion that emotion-performance links are highly individualized is not new (Lane, 2007). I have found success is associated with high scores for vigor coupled with low scores for anger, tension, depression, fatigue, and confusion (see Figure 1).

Autobiographical accounts identify emotional control, confidence and mental toughness in being able to give and receive punishment as important factors for success (Hatton, 2007). In a study that interviewed elite kick boxers, athletes reported the relationship between aggression and emotion. The following quote illustrates the importance of emotional control:

"if you can't control you're anger or you're aggression everything goes out the window... you tense up, body tenses up and then the whole fight goes out the window, as soon as you tense up you lose, especially in what I do because it's so fast and technical and precise, it's so fast that you only have to be off the ball just a little, half a degree and that's it you get caught" (Devonport, 2006).

Whilst boxers indicate that an intention to injure does not necessarily form part of their mindset, the facts are that the consequences of boxing are to injure an opponent. Ethically, the psychologist must reconcile the likely finding that enhancing the psychological skills of one boxer could contribute to the severity of the injury of the other boxer. Competition produces winners and losers and therefore all sport psychologists working with competitive athletes need to reconcile the issue that successful athletes can contribute to causing unhappiness in losing or unsuccessful athletes. These are typically transient mood states, and arguably a normal part of sport. Boxers are different in that medical evidence shows permanent injury.

Whilst I am aware of the risks involved in participating in boxing, as a competitor I did not feel responsibility for the safety of my opponent. In fact, I cannot remember considering safety issues, because, boxing, like many contact sports has safeguards that protect the competitors. The chief safeguards for the welfare of boxers are the referee, corner men, and medical officials available before, during and after the contest. The corner

man/woman should have the boxer's interest at heart. However, in professional boxing, as the corner has a stake in the success of a boxer, they might be reluctant to retire their boxer. The referee should be neutral. However, evidence suggests that the referee is less likely to stop the home fighter, particularly in championship fights (Balmer, Nevill, & Lane, 2005). Medical officials can examine boxers during the interval between rests. Therefore, notwithstanding possible home advantage effects, which officials should be taught to be aware of rather than develop coping strategies through experience, there are a number of safety checks to protect the welfare of the competitors.

If boxers abstain from having a personal responsibility in the welfare of their opponent, then the notion that boxing is unethical due to the link between intention to injure and injury falls away. In sports that share the idea of intending to injure but where safeguards are seen as acceptable, there are fewer ethical issues. If boxing is seen in the same way as fencing, then ethical reasons for involvement in terms of the welfare of boxers dematerialize.

Preparation of boxers

An intriguing aspect of the preparation of a boxer for an important contest is the focus on the quality of movement patterns rather than on achieving outcome goals. This is not to ignore the importance of outcome goals, but if an athlete focuses all attention and motivation on the quality of movement patterns, including selecting the appropriate environmental cues, this increases the likelihood of achieving desired outcome goals; by focusing on the process, the outcome should take care of itself.

In our work with a world championship boxer (Lane, in press), I focused on fostering a sense of intrinsic motivation, enjoying the process and occasion and seeking a goal to perform optimally. Competing at elite level is associated with increased anxiety and other unpleasant emotions (Gould, Dieffenbach, & Moffatt, 2002; Hanin, 2008). It is argued that increased anxiety is related to the perceived importance of the event. Not surprisingly athletes perceive Olympic and World Championship competition as more important than normal competition. Increased emotions occur as the athlete "plays the occasion" rather than focuses on the demands of competition. Our strategy was to develop his attentional control techniques so that he focused on delivering repeated bouts of peak performance, and thus was confident in being able to perform optimally on competition day. We emphasized the notion that successful performance concerns focusing on the quality of movement patterns, and the process of delivering success, rather than outcome goals such as winning was likely to make winning more likely. A difficulty in boxing is for boxers to become fixated on outcome goals, which I recognize as highly important, but the athlete must focus on the process of winning

the contest beyond the result itself.

The pre-requisite mindset for this approach was to see the world championship contest as an opportunity to demonstrate excellence rather than a threat of exposing limitations. Knowing that the contest would be screened live on television was discussed, emphasizing that this was an opportunity to demonstrate a quality performance. We developed positive self-talk slogans related to the process. Whilst somewhat corny, we talked about “*when in the garden, make sure you take time to smell the roses*”, thereby to emphasize the importance of focusing on the process. We discussed the nature of the contest and that it shared many features of typical boxing competition: one ring, one referee, one opponent, both boxers would be nervous, both has to make weight, and so on. These thoughts and emotions were similar to ones experienced many times before, and in fact given he had over 150 contests (amateur and professional). Expecting to feel nervous, but focusing on enjoying the experience was a different approach. We did not seek to reduce feelings of nervousness, suggesting that nerves should be seen as a warning signal that the body is preparing for action, but to interpret these feelings as necessary for success (Lane, 2007).

A key part of world championship preparation was to focus on the quality of performance. To this end, three-way discussions between the coach, boxer and psychologist were held to plan the training schedule. My focus was on supporting him to develop strategies that emphasized the quality of movement patterns and to ensure he was in the appropriate cognitive and emotional state for training sessions in which we sought peak performance. A key part of this session was to develop a belief that the goals he set for a session were attainable, and he learned to associate how he felt and thought beforehand with successful experiences. The strategy for developing this belief was to ensure that at the end of the majority of sessions that he could place a tick in his training diary indicating that “training goal was achieved and that he recognized emotional profiles associated with success”.

In order to be able to achieve all training goals, it was important for him to identify specific goals for each session and to understand how achieving that goal contributed to raising performance standards. My role was to ensure he was in the appropriate cognitive and emotional state. I will focus on four sessions that we used: 1) Endurance fitness, 2) Movement quality and tactical sessions; 3) Sparring, and 4) Mental toughness. We integrated these sessions into the training week with a goal of him performing optimally in sparring sessions. Sparring sessions are the closest training session to competition and we often used sparring partners from different London based gyms, which could mean that travelling to different gyms across London. We worked on developing a mindset that he sought to perform

optimally during these sessions, videotaping them for analysis in a technical session held at the start of the subsequent week. By using mood profiling we identified his optimal performance state (Devonport, Lane, & Hanin, 2005), monitored mood variation daily to identify aspects of training that left him highly fatigued, and then re-organized sessions accordingly (see Figures 2-3). The plan was to ensure that the early parts of the week were used for developing skill and tactical aspects of his performance, culminating in one high quality sparring session. The later part of the week was devoted to raising physiological fitness, raising his capability in being able to cope with intense exercise by altering perceptions of exertion, and working on his ability to control his concentration when physiological cues prevail, as they tend to do during intense training. This session was intended to develop mental toughness.

Mood profiles used to monitor training are contained in Figures 2-3. Figure 2 shows adaptive responses to intense training with fatigue progressively increasing, vigor maintaining its baseline level, with no discernible changes in other emotions. In Figure 3 shows how mood states were monitored and training adapted so that the boxer was in his optimal emotional state when sparring. As indicated in Figure 4, he experienced some mood variation in training, particularly for tension and anger. His optimal emotional profile (see Figure 1) showed he associated with success with high vigor coupled with low scores for anger, confusion, depression, fatigue and tension. He reported being particularly sensitive to the effects of fatigue, and therefore, by monitoring the effects of training on mood states we could structure training so that we could the balance between overload and recovery about right.

A key aspect of ensuring he had confidence to perform optimally was based on previous performance accomplishments (Bandura, 1997). For sessions that were designed to be slow and develop endurance fitness and part of the weight-management schedule, we used to run together. We would run for around an hour at a pace that we could talk. Talking with him allowed access to how he felt about training and other factors. It is important to support the athlete as a person and not just the person as an athlete (Andersen, 2006). These long runs would identify a host of issues that could lead to increased anger and tension on that day, or over a number of days. Professional athletes share many of the frailties of normal people, something that should not be overlooked. A key part of these sessions was to emphasize that success was judged by the ease in which the session was performed, and not how hard it was performed. In the early stages of the schedule, he wished to speed up on hills, sprint at the end, and turn the session into an inter-person competition. In essence, he wished to replicate

some of the performance demands of competition. Work was done asking him to look at his belief that all training sessions needed to be hard, and exercising in company represented competition. We asked him to challenge this belief. The key driver was that he needed to raise the standard of his performance on other sessions, and by going easier on the session we were actually training at a higher quality, because we were training a different quality of the performance pie.

The above case study is illustrative of emotional changes that occur in boxing and the importance of emotional control.

Concluding comments

My concluding comments are that boxing represents a challenging environment in which to work (Lane, 2006) identifies difficulties working in the sport in terms of developing a solid relation footing. I would recommend that if consultants are ensure of their attitude on the potentiality ethical dilemma of the care of the athlete, that they reflect on the reasons why they are ensure before offering their services. Working with boxers should be about providing support for a person about to undertake a deeply personal challenge. Boxers share many of the frailties of other athletes, and for professional fighters, a livelihood earned by boxing, where defeat can be career threatening often involves competing in a pressure-cooker environment.

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Figure 1.

Optimal emotional states associated with success



Figure 2.
Adaptive responses to four days hard training

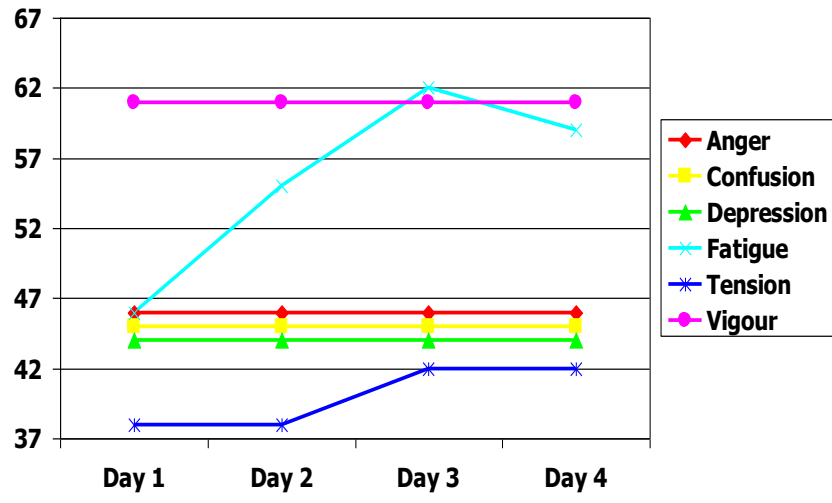


Figure 3
Mood repair for peak performance following hard training

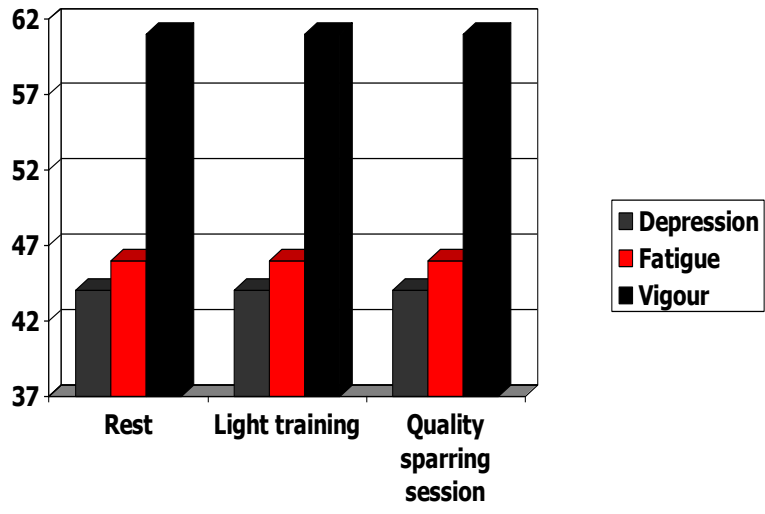


Figure 4
Mood State responses to four days hard training

