

Mark Rivlin interviews Chris Levy, a 156-graded member of Hackney Chess Club and a regular on the ChessBoxing circuit.

How long have you been playing competitive chess?

I've had two stints, five years as a junior before I gave the game up like many others around the age of 20. I then took the game up again in my late 20s thanks to discovering chessboxing.

What made you want to throw your hat into the ring as a chessboxer?

I've always quite liked the idea of trying boxing, but was intimidated by the idea of walking into a 'proper' boxing gym as opposed to a boxercise type class. Once I discovered the idea of chessboxing, it seemed like the perfect chance to try my hand at pugilism. Once I'd been to one session I realised I was completely wrong in my thoughts on boxing gyms – everyone there is extremely welcoming and respectful, even towards chess players.

For the uninitiated, please describe how chessboxing works.

There are 10 alternating rounds of both, until someone wins one way or the other. The board is taken out of the ring at the end of a chess 'round' and then brought back in after the boxing and the game continues where it left off. Clocks are set to around 10-15 minutes each, which can be used as you like over the course of the chess rounds. Another important aspect is we have to wear noise-cancelling headphones as there is a chess commentator describing the action to the audience and sometimes strong players shouting out tips.

How many chessboxing events have you participated in?

Five as a fighter and others as a commentator as I'm more or less retired. I'm the Gary Neville of chessboxing, if you will.

Are chessboxers more proficient at one of the two disciplines? To win a match, which do you think has more influence on the overall outcome?

Chess, without a doubt. For reasons of safety and spectacle, we have to match up opponents who are reasonably close in both disciplines. Assuming there isn't a physical mismatch I'd say the chess decides 8 out of 10 times. In particular, the transition from a boxing round to a chess round is the 'danger zone' – once you've got a round of boxing under your belt it easily takes around 20-30 ECF points off your playing strength. This is less through having been hit and more through having a lot of adrenaline coursing through your veins, which makes it very difficult to think objectively.

You are now a commentator on the chessboxing scene. Do you use any football manager cliches?

I confess to resorting more to the lowest common denominator innuendos on the chess – I'll leave the reader to think of examples. We used to have Malcolm Pein as a commentator and I picked this up off of him, I think.

I remember your gruelling bout in the iconic York Hall with Matt 'Crazy Arms' Read, co-editor of *CHESS* magazine. Is that your most exciting bout to date?

Like the recent Fury-Wilder bout, this was a rematch and the first was also pretty exciting. However, getting to fight at such a venue combined with an unlikely comeback chess win (having been thoroughly outplayed by Matt) made this one particularly memorable.

I've noticed that audiences at Chessboxing tend to be more hipster than a usual boxing only card. How important is the ringside atmosphere?

We get a really diverse crowd at events which I think makes it a fun evening out. I've seen stag parties, couples on date nights, and some very strong GMs (we had Fabiano Caruana and Maurice Ashley mingling at an event we put on in the middle of the London Chess Classic).

In the chess part, how difficult is it to concentrate on strategy after a pummeling in the previous boxing round?

This really is the trickiest bit! In particular you're naturally drawn towards aggressive continuations, even if you know they are bad, due to all that adrenaline.

What is the women's scene in chessboxing?

We've had a couple of high-class bouts, but I think because we tend to draw more from the chess than the boxing scenes, there are fewer women. We'd love to see this changing, and there are a few women who are training with us every week who we'd be very happy to match up. The atmosphere is very welcoming, I'd like to think.

What are the minimum levels of chess and boxing required to make a decent chessboxer?

In boxing you don't have to bring any experience to make it and with dedicated training I think it is possible to become technically proficient enough to fight competitively within a year. On the chess we have a few fighters around 100 ECF strength who match well against each other. At the very top, there is FM Carl Strugnell who is undefeated.

Any advice for people who would like to take up the sport?

Check out our next event by coming along to The Dome in Tufnell Park or watch online: www.twitch.tv/londonchessboxing. If you fancy getting the gloves on come along to training at Islington ABC (link below) 10am on Saturdays. Above all else, don't be intimidated as I was about the idea of boxing!

For further information on chessboxing please go to <https://londonchessboxing.com/classes/>