

Mind over Matter: An insight into the psychology of boxing

'Calmness under pressure, a ruthless sense of focus, mental toughness and lack of self-blame when things go wrong'. [Harry Harland](#) assesses whether psychopathic tendencies could be beneficial in boxing

Sunday 1 September 2013



Image: roger_alcantara

When encountering the word 'psychopath' most people tend to think of the likes of Ian Brady and Hannibal Lecter. It may therefore be pertinent to stress that whilst most serial killers are psychopaths, most psychopaths are not serial killers.

Violence is not even a defining feature of psychopathy. However, some characteristics you may expect to find are: calmness under pressure, a ruthless sense of focus, mental toughness and lack of self-blame when things go wrong. You may thus expect the psychopath to be a formidable force within sport, particularly in the field of boxing - my sport of choice.

Professor Kevin Dutton, in *The Wisdom of Psychopaths*, details a visit to one of Broadmoor's most segregated Dangerous and Severe Personality Disorder wards. Here one of the inmates (rather conveniently for me) discusses a quote from an eminent boxing coach to the effect that: if you enter the ring focused on knocking your opponent out, you will probably fail. On the other hand, if you focus on simply doing your job, you may end up knocking the opponent out anyway.

Manny Pacquiao might have learnt from this in some of his earlier bouts and even in his most recent encounter with Juan Manuel Márquez last December. The knockdowns he has suffered have often occurred due to the same fault. When dismantling an opponent it is rather easy to find yourself overcome by an urge to end the fight by throwing more powerful shots. However, in boxing the bigger the blade, the smaller the shield: yielding to this temptation increases your susceptibility to unanticipated counter-punches. Pacquiao's inability to resist overly aggressive pursuits is his hamartia and a greater degree of the self-control that psychopaths are renowned for might have prevented a number of knockdowns and even some of his defeats.

Similarly, that lack of self-blame psychopaths have when things aren't going their way is advantageous. It is very easy, after taking a heavy blow, to seek immediate vengeance by returning such a punch. Succumbing to this desire brings same consequences just discussed. A prime example is when Amir Khan suffered his last defeat at the hands of Danny Garcia. After suffering two knockdowns in the same round, the most reasonable thing to do would be to retreat and avoid close encounters in order to prolong mental and physical recovery. Khan, on the other hand, decided to jump straight back into the lion's den with legs like Bambi's. The result of this was, as you will have guessed, a third knockdown, which brought the fight to an end. Unlike Khan, psychopaths are masters of avoiding such emotional temptation.

On the other hand, there are times when it could be beneficial to box in a more aggressive manner. The 'poker' analogy may be quite the cliché in sports, but a 'poker face' is a great asset in boxing. Let your opponent know you're hurt and he's sure to finish you off. However, at the highest levels, some boxers even feign affliction in order to lure their opponents into the type of trap that Pacquiao has the tendency to fall into. I recall Muhammad Ali speaking of such tactics in an interview once.

Dexter's Dr Evelyn Vogel and many real people like her claim that psychopaths 'have no empathy', so you may be wondering how their psychological disposition allows them to read their opponents. It could be true that psychopaths feel no empathy, however, they are in fact masters of reading humans and their emotions. A study at Brock University led by Angela Book in 2009 found that the more psychopathic someone is, the better they are at spotting vulnerable individuals. Knowing whether your opponent is trying to feign or conceal pain could, at times, prove considerably advantageous, so here we are faced with another reason psychopaths are more likely to triumph.

Another striking feature of the psychopath is his calmness under pressure (they are, for some reason, mostly men). An illustration of this which immediately springs to mind is a test Dr Nick Cooper conducted with Professor Dutton and the former SAS operative Andy McNab, a man riddled with psychopathic traits. Although the test was not explicitly one of his ability to handle pressure, McNab's pulse rates were measured whilst he was shown vivid images of 'dismemberment, mutilation, torture and execution', accompanied by 'blaring sirens and hissing white noise' - scenarios which would set the every man's heart pounding. McNab's physiological outputs didn't remain at resting level, however, as you may have suspected. In fact, they dropped below his baseline, something Dr Cooper wouldn't have believed had he not conducted the test himself. This is quite clearly a man who thrives on what the average person might call stress or pressure. Immediately I am reminded of something Floyd Mayweather once said: 'great athletes perform better under pressure, so put pressure on me.'

Steven Harland, my father and coach, often speaks of 'nervous energy' - anxiety which can be more draining than any physical exertion. This can be the boxer's nemesis, as it affects every physical and mental aspect of the sport. Boxing requires you to think fast in the heat of the moment. Boxing requires balance. Boxing requires coordination between all limbs. Nervousness inhibits all of these and the last two are particularly difficult to achieve if your legs are shaking furiously (rather like Khan's before the referee stopped his fight with Garcia).

Prince Naseem was renowned for his lack of fitness training and incredibly undisciplined diet even before fights. Whilst he ended many of his bouts prematurely, 9 of the 36 lasted beyond the 8th round, only 1 of which he lost. Many of his opponents would most probably have left him in the condition he normally left them in, had they went head-to-head in any boxing fitness test, such as high-intensity interval training.

Yet Naseem was always able to match their endurance in the ring. It would, of course, seem facile to suggest that it must have been his psychopathic level of imperturbability which allowed for this and such a statement would be speculation at best. However, it seems obvious that a sense of great coolness under pressure could go a long way in not just boxing but many other sports.

The psychopath also demonstrates unrelenting focus. This is a necessary condition for boxers. It becomes an even greater necessity for those who wish to fight with a loose or unorthodox guard, like Naseem or Mayweather. With their slackened defences, the slightest lapse in concentration could quite easily bring the fight to an abrupt end. Mayweather is so focused in the ring that he almost looks scared, although I imagine he is anything but. In an interview before his fight with Zab Zudah, he stated 'There may be guys who are physically stronger than me, but there's no one who can match me mentally. I'm happy and comfortable. I know in my heart that I'll win. I know that I'm the best fighter in boxing.' Whilst being a psychopath does not say much about your intelligence, if psychopathic concentration is partnered with an astute mind and an athletic body, it is quite easy to imagine the result.

Not all psychopathic traits are beneficial for boxing, however. As noted by Professor Robert Hare, narcissism is a highly common characteristic of the psychopath and it may be no coincidence that so many prominent sports personalities also possess it. Like a mosquito at a nude beach, it's difficult to know where to begin with naming such figures within boxing, although the infuriating Tyson Fury is a recent one who springs to mind. Whilst a healthy degree of confidence may be helpful, if a boxer allows arrogance to consume him, it can lead to under-training, under-dieting and poor defences. A most gratifying example of pomposity encumbering boxing may be found [on YouTube](#).

Another problematic feature for psychopaths is their propensity to live for the moment. 'Pure' psychopaths don't pay much regard to the future, which would highly reduce the likelihood of them adhering to strict training and dieting programs over a long period of time. Even for the most naturally gifted of athletes (with astonishingly few exceptions), all sports require a high degree of commitment, and for this reason it seems that the 'pure' psychopath seems greatly unsuited to boxing and other sports. However, modern psychology has shifted away from the black-and-white view of 'you either are or aren't a psychopath', meaning you can be psychopathic without actually being a complete psychopath.

Whilst I always think of a bar chart, Professor Dutton sees psychopathy as a set of dials, each one representing a different trait. If each of these dials is turned to the highest degree, the psychopath is destined for failure. However, if they are adjusted to just the right levels, certain characteristics being more prevalent than others, a highly, but not 'purely' psychopathic individual may thrive in any sport. Yet, as reasonable as this may sound, for some disappointing and unknown reason, psychopathy remains largely unexplored within the sporting world. Perhaps psychopathy still harbours too many negative connotations for people to want to discover the true psychological nature of their athletic idols. However, with rising sympathy towards the psychopath, largely catalysed by TV shows such as Dexter and Hannibal, I can only hope that this will change.



7 comments

TheMexHurricane

2 Sep '13 at 3:49 am

Fascinating article Mr. Harland! Keep up the great work!

 Report

jame hylton

2 Sep '13 at 4:19 pm

Great article

[Report](#)

Jennifer Frances Armstrong

3 Sep '13 at 3:57 am

Really awesome, well-written article!

[Report](#)

Fran Sands

23 Dec '13 at 11:01 pm

Superb article Harry, had me fully engaged from start to finish and also got this boxing coach thinking! Well done mate, hats off to you.

[Report](#)

Scottie Hamilton

24 Dec '13 at 12:05 am

Quality article, absolutely fascinating.

[Report](#)

John murray

12 Mar '17 at 12:15 am

Transcendent sport that requires great courage and aggression
no amount of psychology will ever solve the mystery of this ritual

[Report](#)

Anonymous

31 Dec '17 at 12:26 am

Whilst I appreciate a lot of the points made and why, I actually disagree completely with the link between psychopaths and world class sports stars including boxing. You don't need a lack of empathy to have the will to win a contest. If you look at the psychopath test, the majority of traits are related to exploiting others and faking ability, the best example in sports is lance Armstrong who used these traits to enhance his natural ability and manipulate the people around him without a shred of empathy when he destroyed their careers in the process. He was a focussed, talented and disciplined athlete without the other traits to start with. Having no empathy for an opponent has nothing to do with beating them. Take the Haye day fight at the o2 against the Albanian, I happened to be front row and saw first hand how the fight was won before haye stepped in the ring. After the fireworks and national anthem and Churchill speech echoing around the arena, the Albo and his team's shoulders had dropped to the point of defeat before it even started. Feeling indestructible and psyching an opponent out has nothing to do with psychopathy.

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