

Gabriele Bagnoli

Interview at the “Associazione Boxe Voghera” Club, Voghera, June 21, 2002

I am twenty-two and a skilled mechanic. I work on the lathe and as a hobby, which has become my greatest passion, I box. I have been practicing this sport for about a year and a half. At first I did kick boxing and Thai box. Then one day a friend suggested I try working out in the boxing gym to improve the use of my arms. The intention was to continue with kick boxing, but when I got to the gym I immediately found myself. There was a coach with good technique and preparation who could better adapt himself to the needs and characteristics of the guys. So I stayed and definitively left kick boxing. I was happier because I wanted to do competition, to fight and the other gyms didn't often allow me to do that. At “Boxe Voghera” I immediately found a nice atmosphere with world champions like Giovanni Parisi and another great professional like Vincenzo Gigliotti. I found myself right away. After a year and a half, boxing has become a great passion and I think it always will be. If, for whatever reason, I should ever leave competition, maybe because I find myself up against adversaries who are better than I am, or maybe I'm not improving anymore, I still want to remain in the field and become a coach. In some way I want to remain connected to sports in general, better yet if it's boxing.

What differences have you noticed between kick boxing and boxing, not just on a sport's level but in terms of the atmosphere in the two environments, differences in the type of people practicing and following these two sports?

An art of combat like kick boxing is nice because it's varied: there are kicks, punches, turn kicks and it is spectacular and beautiful to watch. In the beginning, boxing seems very simple and not worth much; the impression is you get hit and that's it. However when I began training as a boxer I discovered that there are an infinite number of movements, ways of punching, ways of moving: you only fully realize it by boxing. Certainly it's nice doing kick boxing too, but if you take a look at nearly all the Italian and world champions in this discipline they are all amateur or professional boxers. This is because in any case you need a basis in boxing even if in kick boxing your legs work in a totally different way. You need the basis in boxing because otherwise you have no sense of distance, no eye and no ability to move about in the ring. In addition, in my view, kick boxing is too dangerous because you get hit too hard in the legs. When you're young, at the moment, you don't feel it but after a few years you see the consequences. You take punches in boxing, but at least only in the face and if you learn to box well, before you learn to hit you learn not to get hit: that is the basis. Anyone can hit, the difficulty is in protecting yourself, ducking and turning. In kick boxing matches you have to pay out of your own pocket as well, and you don't have in-depth medical

visits such as electroencephalogram and electrocardiogram under exertion and at rest. There are no analyses and medical check ups. Even as an amateur you can't face your first match without a medical visit behind you: otherwise there's no safety. On the other hand when I went to the boxing gym I immediately said I wanted to do competition and first thing, they had me do a medical visit. This set me immediately at ease, it showed they were serious. In this sport you take punches; it's not like soccer where at worst you stop, throw the ball and catch your breath. Here you're in the ring and if you stop you're going to take punches which surely aren't going to do you any good. Another important aspect is that as opposed to kick boxing, boxing is recognized by CONI and this insures a whole series of things. It offers you something: it's an Olympic sport, there are the Italian Nationals and even though it requires a lot of sacrifice you can get somewhere. In kick boxing there are so many federations, well ... lots of smoke and no fire: it's enough to do two or three matches and like nothing you're Italian champion because there are few challengers and lots of federations. Just enroll in a federation with few athletes and few matches and you're Italian champion. In amateur or professional boxing to become Italian champion you need a minimum of two to three years practice; you have to have good technique and a good coach behind you. If you take a look at the Italian middle weight champions, which is my category, you'll find people who know how to box.

What differences in environment did you find between the two sports?

There is a big difference. Certainly both are combat sports so unfortunately you happen to find kids who come to the gym to learn how to hit and then go around and pick fights. I say kids of around fifteen but they can be twenty or over. However, in the boxing gym you work out more and when you're training for competition you don't go around picking fights. You box because you feel it inside you. On the other hand in the kick boxing gym, I saw a lot of kids who work out only to be able to go around and say they're fighting: it wasn't a nice atmosphere. Boxing has a strong tradition; it exists for centuries and has been recognized officially for eighty years. As a result, the discipline is well known both on the technical side and in terms of preparation: the diet to follow, how you do gymnastics, the various exercises, the different techniques. In kick boxing they put you in the ring and every day you do a heavy work out because they think that by simply doing three hours work out a day you automatically have the wind of a marathon runner. That has nothing to do with it; the right work out method should be followed. If you work out every day to the hilt you get to the point where you explode: it doesn't help at all. It would be better to do just an hour but do it well.

You get more experience in boxing.

Yes, you get much more experience; it's a long procedure to become a boxing coach: for two years a coach follows you, you have to enroll in the Italian Boxing Federation

and have all your papers in order. After the two years you have to do updating courses and take the exam to become a coach. In kick boxing after a course of a month you become a coach. Yes, you understand the technique but that's not enough because in sport mere technique doesn't exist. What I say is where there's more experience there's more safety. Many boxing gyms in Milan are good for kick boxing because they have boxing coaches behind them.

What satisfaction and difficulties have you found in boxing?

The difficulties are the usual ones: you always have to find the desire to work out because working out is tough and then the disappointment when you lose is great. You have to understand why you lost, or at times you lose but in reality you didn't lose; unfortunately this happens. Then there's the punch that gets you and it hurts, there's suffering in the ring... but it's such a strong passion that you can overcome these things. Afterwards, when you win, the satisfaction is enormous and each victory gives you an added lift to go back and work out, it adds a little something more to your activity in the gym. Certainly this can also happen when you lose: the only time I lost, I went back to the gym with twice as much drive to work out. I really wanted to win the return match. Boxing is great because you challenge yourself. In the end you have to overcome your fears and if you win against a good adversary it means you were really able to improve. Certainly even when you win, nothing is perfect in a match, you always make mistakes. After a match you think about it and try to correct yourself, in the next match you won't make the same mistakes, maybe you'll make others and you'll try to correct them in your next training sessions... it's a continuous circle and it's nice just for that. In individual sports these aspects – effort, improvement - are sensed more with respect to team sports. In boxing it's one against one: either you win or he wins.

What does the gym atmosphere mean to you?

I want to say right away that in this gym I found myself and I'm still happy. When I began to box, after a few months I left for the army and they sent me near Piacenza. I went to work out in another gym, in Piacenza and I didn't find the same atmosphere as Voghera. That's also because I consider Livio Lucarno, my coach, one of the best coaches in Italy. Lucarno understands kids well, it just takes a glance, two or three workout sessions and he's already figured you out and knows how to handle you. He is able to create an excellent rapport with boxers, a very human rapport. If Livio has something to tell you he tells you right to your face and if for many, this is a defect, for me it's an asset. I don't have this asset, I can't tell you something straight to your face, it could take me months. In any case, in boxing, the coach is the most important figure: with no coach, there's no boxer. In addition to Lucarno at Voghera we also have Lucia-no Bernini, a very good trainer, naturally with less experience than Lucarno who has been in the boxing world for forty years and is aware of every aspect. I got along very

well with Bernini too, he's always available and a coach who is available can give a boxer a lot more. For example there aren't very many people who at thirty-two will go running with you at eight thirty on a Sunday morning. This helps you and urges you on, it shows a lot of enthusiasm and you can see it. Both people put their heart into it with the kids in the gym and for boxing. I haven't found this atmosphere in other gyms. When you go into the ring, Lucarno and Bernini don't say "go on, hit, smash everything" like other coaches do. No, they help you stay tranquil and calm. The first round is to study your adversary, then they give you advice: "use your left more", etc... In a fight the approach is different. It could be right to incite your boxer, but it all depends on the kid, you can't make any fixed rules. If a kid needs stimulus okay, but if you find the kind that doesn't need stimulus because he's already got it, if you pump him up like that he won't be able to figure anything out and he won't be able to concentrate.

What's the value of victory?

I give a lot of importance to victory. When I win I'm the happiest person in the world but then I'm never sure, I always have to ask my two coaches if I it was a good win or if they just handed me the victory. I need to feel sure that I won in every aspect: technically, psychologically. When I win I'm on another planet, I feel fulfilled because in the end I've made weeks of sacrifice. Every evening you're in the gym working out, you do some sparring, maybe with Parisi, taking some punches that you'd rather not take, then the enormous satisfaction of having won.

How is the rapport between boxers outside of this gym, and between adversaries?

The beauty of boxing lies in the fact that every time you finish a match you embrace and shake hands with your adversary, you thank him, you compliment each other, you say hello to his coach. In soccer they often slit each other's throats on and off the field and to win, they resort to fouls. I always use the example of soccer because I played for eight years and I can say the good rapport that you find with your adversaries in boxing isn't easy to find in other sports. Even when we are sparring amongst friends here in the gym there's never rancor when you take a hard hit, because there isn't nastiness, you're hitting to learn something, everyone wants to try new things, new moves. Then after sparring maybe you talk about it: "I liked how you threw that uppercut, it was a good hit, you hurt me..." It seems strange to say, but it's nice, really special and you find it only in boxing. Many people who have met me recently, when they discovered I was a boxer they didn't know what to think, that I'm a violent guy when in fact I've never laid hands on anyone. Unfortunately boxing has this negative image because in the past many boxers were put in jail and now with Tyson they get carried away. I think Tyson is the worst example of boxing. In the past, a third of the world champion boxers had run up against the law, but certainly not because they were boxers. In fact, in certain particularly difficult social situations, boxing has helped a lot of kids avoid jail.

Today, just before coming to Voghera, I exchanged two words with my neighbor and I told him about the work I'm doing on boxing. His reaction was immediate, almost angry: he didn't want to hear anything about it; it's a violent, vulgar sport. I asked him if he had ever had anything to do with boxing, talked with a boxer, visited a gym or seen a match. He said no. What do you think?

Unfortunately this opinion is quite widespread. When I started my job in the workshop and they learned I was boxing they immediately made the usual comments: whoever's in boxing is a half-wit, what does he think he's doing... Unfortunately boxing is seen as a violent sport. Certainly it's a violent sport; I'm the first to admit it: in the end you throw punches, but you don't throw them in nastiness to hurt someone for personal reasons. You throw punches to win and that's different. Boxing is seen as a violent sport because the media pumps up this aspect. You could see it in the last Tyson match when there was a fight during the press conference. They do these things to attract attention, to get publicity. Certainly it's the wrong kind of promotion because it makes this sport appear more violent than it really is. Concerning the recent Tyson-Lewis match, at the end of the match during the interviews, there was Tyson caressing Lewis on the face and he complimented him on winning. Certainly Tyson isn't a saint, but many things that happen before a match, the fights and insults are publicity; they serve to attract attention. Many people, when they see a match they don't see boxing but punches, blood, the fight and nastiness. There is very little awareness of what boxing really is. Boxing is one of the most complete sports: it involves running, your arms, gymnastics, agility and strength. Larger gloves and an obligatory head protector for amateurs have been introduced. This means that in any case, people want to see more boxing, more technique and less the injury, the cut. Every boxer who has reached a high level has his own style, his personality and the hits he prefers. This helps to distinguish one boxer from another; it creates a difference between the various athletes and the spectacle of the sport benefits. There are only three hits in boxing but as you progress in your training, the more you realize there is to learn. It seems you've learned everything and then you discover that there is always something you don't know how to do, maybe ducking behind and coming back in with a right or ducking behind and coming back with a right-left... There are only three hits but the combinations are infinite.

How did boxing change you?

Boxing is a sport that requires a lot of effort. It means working out every day and always finding the drive even when you don't have it. For a practical reason working out systematically every day taught me to organize myself better: working out every day I don't have much free time so if I want to do something else I have to organize my day well. Then you have to learn to affront the tension before a match, you learn self-con-

trol in difficult situations.

What is the rapport between boxing and violence?

There is certainly a slight connection between boxing and violence, because in the end boxing means punching your opponent's face and body, therefore it is a violent sport. However, too often we associate boxing exclusively with violence when in reality it isn't like that. This sport, as I have already said, has saved many kids from difficult situations. You go to the gym and there is a direct, human rapport between people. Your coach tries to teach you to box but he also tries to pull out the problems you may have in life. Certainly it depends on the coach: with mine I have a good rapport because it isn't just made up of boxing, we discuss lots of things and he advises me on everything even things outside of the gym. So boxing isn't only a factor of punches, in the end there is always contact with other people; there's friendship. Several boxers have become delinquents but it isn't boxing directly that made them like that. Maybe it was the money, fame or something else. Tyson, who came from nothing, for example, certainly wasn't a nice type from the beginning and the moment he saw money he began to do stupid things that he didn't do before. I don't associate the term "boxing" with "violence" because if you think about it, at a soccer game there are people who go to the stadium to kill themselves whereas in a boxing match I never saw people fighting. I only saw that in the ring.

Stefano Cassi

Interview at the “Bergamo Boxe” Club, Bergamo, June 11, 2002

You were a professional boxer in the 80's and 90's and then you withdrew in 1996.

Can you tell me about your career, the years when you were working?

I'm fairly brief and concise in what I do, in a second I'll get you to my professional career. There's also not much to tell. I lived near the gym, 300 meters away. In any case I didn't even know where the gym was until the day the mailman on my street indicated it to me. Since then twenty-three years have gone by.

How old are you now?

Forty. It all started due to enthusiasm, like all of us, by the way. Our group began to go to the gym, there were fifteen, twenty of us but in the end I'm the only one left. At the beginning, slowly, slowly I began to do matches but without too much effort, to pass the time, for fun. I had good results: regional champion and second in the Italian. Then I stopped for two years because I was at the point, at eighteen, where I was tired of being amateur and to go professional I had to be twenty-one which was legal age, whereas now you can move to professional at eighteen. After two years pause I came back, worked out for five months and went into professional. Since then I've gone for four Italian titles, I won two, I did two European championships in Paris and Madrid. I quit six years ago. In my career I've done forty matches, many won by knockouts. Now I enjoy myself and for a hobby I teach, especially friends and this way I can stay in shape.

You teach here, at “Bergamo Boxe”?

Yes, I'm always here. First I taught in other gyms and I had to move from one part of Bergamo to another, but in the end it tired me out. I get tired with things easily. The only sport, sport and work that I've done for several years is boxing, I liked it and I still like to do it now.

So you were professional from twenty-one to thirty-four, fourteen years. What have been the satisfactions in your career, satisfactions and also delusions?

No delusions. Maybe yes, the first times I lost. Then it comes to mind that you win and lose also, the second time you can try to do better. Certainly you always have to be objective with yourself, if your adversary is better, you have to admit to yourself that he is better, there's nothing to do about it. But you don't recriminate yourself, you're sure of what you're doing, you're at peace with yourself. You don't say “I lost, but if I had done this, if I hadn't gone there...” all these “ifs” shouldn't exist. In fact if you can get rid of the “ifs” you're more certain when the moment comes for you to go into the ring: I did everything well, I worked out well, I didn't hang around like an idiot at night, didn't cha-

se after girls...the usual stuff. Then you're more sure of yourself and your preparation. It's difficult for a boxer not to recriminate himself, there's always something. So I've had a lot of satisfaction, more than not. And the satisfaction, beyond the titles you win and the matches, the newspaper headlines, beyond all this is the personal pleasure. I took advantage of my job to travel; I've fought very few matches in my city, Bergamo. That's because boxing in Bergamo couldn't offer me anything, I have always gotten more out of matches on tour. I've had matches all over Italy and I've boxed abroad. In fact they called me from abroad because I was always ready. Maybe they called me at the last minute, a week before a match the phone call would come from my agent asking if I wanted to do a match maybe four days later. He'd say: “We have to go to Switzerland”... in Switzerland for example I've boxed a lot and had some great matches, even with contenders who did the world championship. I've boxed in Denmark. In Denmark I went by myself, with my bag, I got up and went. Cassi is always ready. They have to give me two three days to get ready and I'd leave. Logically there was a certain economic comeback, I did something though... If I prefer boxing outside of Italy, and not only for financial reasons. Well, yes, it was tax free but I like to travel.

So you were always working out, always ready for a match.

Yes, I would work out every day, always. The day that I rest I'd do maybe only fifteen kilometers of running; I was a real machine. Then I quit because I was tired, the last two matches I lost on points but if I had been the Stefano Cassi of a few years ago I would have won them hands down. So I convinced myself and I decided to quit. Even though afterwards I had some excellent financial offers, they didn't help convince me. I was tired; one could say I was saturated with boxing. In fact from the moment I stopped work to the moment I started going to the gym again, a year and a half passed. I really had to get away from it. And after a bit of time, just as I thought, I wanted to go back to the gym again. Now if three, four, five days pass I feel I have to go to the gym, maybe just to do a run. Here I've spent a lot of my life. You could say: it put food in my mouth for several years, and besides it was also good food. Now I work out to stay in form, I teach, and logically I have my job. That's because like all boxers, I have a certain mindset. Aside from the fact that I was on tour a lot for boxing, I also did a lot of traveling. As soon as I had the money from a match I'd take a trip.

And your current job has nothing to do with boxing.

Absolutely nothing, it's obviously heavy work in a metal fabrication shop.

You couldn't find a job connected to boxing in some way?

I could have done it, I tried to, it's that... maybe I'm spoiled and I cost a lot and I saw there wasn't a lot of money around, unless you threw yourself into being an agent. Boxing is in a lot of trouble in Italy. What can I say, for me it's slowly, slowly dying, there's no longer anyone willing to make the sacrifice. There are people in the gym but it's the kid

who pays his monthly to punch a bag. Instead of playing soccer or basket they come to the gym. That's not wrong though.

What's the difference between the boxing environment now and when you did it?

Then it was very different. First of all the pay was better; much, much better. If there were doubts, certainly that factor made you want to continue. Then it's always your enthusiasm that makes you go on, not so much the money. The financial part comes to mind after eight, ten years of boxing. I'm doing something I like but I want some economic feedback because in the end that's what I live from. When you're a professional, doing things the way you should means working out four to six hours a day, which is really difficult if at the same time you have a job. And back then boxing was publicized, and especially more sponsors. There was more money in the boxing world.

And the quality level of the sport, can you hazard a judgment?

The quality level of the sport you can't even say because back then... if I say "back then" it seems like I'm eighty, but in a short time the situation has totally changed, in fact that's why you want to say "back then", because it's really effectively gone from white to black. Back then there were more "subjects", more good people; even in Italy alone, a small country, but far better or worse we've always had a world champion in almost all the categories.

How has boxing changed you?

Absolutely in no way. The only thing is that I have never fought outside of the ring and not even in the ring because in the ring you don't fight. I've never been quarrelsome and I never will be because it's not my nature. For the rest, it hasn't changed me at all. If you like, it changed me because I was always on the road; I always had my suitcase ready: for a match or to go on vacation my suitcase was always ready. Cuba, Mexico, Brazil... I stayed in Santo Domingo for two years.

What is the gym for you?

Now the gym is a pleasure. Even if then it was also a pleasure except for the last moments of preparation when I practically didn't eat. One could say that I went hungry for fifteen years to make the right weight. But it was always a pleasure and it always will be. Even now when I'm tired from work, it's difficult not to go to the gym every day, maybe just to stop by, say a thing or two to the kids, I don't do anything, I change, have a shower and leave. I don't know, it does me good.

Another question about your past. Do you miss anything? The competition, the match...

No, because I did a lot of matches, as I said, I stopped due to the fact that I was saturated.

I'm satisfied, very satisfied, maybe some regrets, like in all things, but I always did what I had to do and did my best. I can only say that I tried to manage my career as well as possible. What I gave was all I could give; more, I don't know.

What is the rapport between boxing and violence?

For me there is no rapport because I (and maybe mine is a specific case) but with all my adversaries, after the match we were at the same table eating, laughing and joking. Even if maybe he had won by a knockout, or I had. Violence doesn't exist; you go into the ring, you and him. I have two arms, two hands and he the same. First of all you're prepared physically and psychologically for the event, then at the end we start hitting, even on the face, but that's part of the game. No one is pointing a pistol to force you to go behind the ropes.

And there's no nastiness?

Nastiness can come out when there's dirty play in a match: butting, elbowing; that really got me angry. Then you'd go out to eat all the same, but before I wanted to get him on the carpet. Once, I'll always remember, we were outdoors, in Pesaro, and a great meet. An intentional but from an adversary in the fifth round split my eyebrow, a small cut. In the sixth round I gave him a clear knock out. There are moments of anger, but in the end we went out to supper together all the same, like I said. Maybe there's a moment of anger, but you vent it immediately.

Two words about the media, how they see boxing. There's always the stereotype of the nasty, ignorant boxer.

Today boxing has changed. At the time, before I was boxing, you could think they were right. This happened especially in heavy weight: I think we all have the same brain, whether you weigh forty or eighty kilo. The difference is the strength of what hits you. So it was easier to find people a bit loco in heavy weight. Now it's different, there are too many medical check ups. Already when I was fighting we'd have two visits a year and they'd turn you inside out like a glove, they'd check everywhere. It's important to remember that boxing is tenth in sport mortality; there are many sports ahead of us. But anyone seeing a boxing match sees violence immediately because these two are fighting. But those two aren't fighting.

This is hard to understand.

Yes, this is hard for the media to understand.

On this count is there a difference between now and when you were fighting?

As time passes I see there are always fewer boxers. This means that this way of thinking

is gaining ground and as a result kids come to the gym less than before.

How would you describe boxing? What's your personal idea?

I've always thought of boxing as a cure-all which can keep you out of trouble. Maybe you're a guy who's, how do you say, "particular"; practicing a discipline that requires method helps you avoid certain ways. I don't know, maybe I could have been one of them too.

It's an outlet...

Exactly, that's just what I meant.

How much does winning count?

Winning is a great thing. Personally though, out of forty matches, having won about thirty-five, it rarely happened to me to say that was a perfect victory. I always tended to be very critical, a real perfectionist. But perhaps that was a good thing because this attitude makes you try and improve,

You always look for something negative even when the match went well and was positive; it pushes you to continue to improve. This is an aspect of the sport which should be an aspect of life. But it's certainly difficult to do this, here I am now talking. But at least in sports I managed to do it.

So also in the ring, the final match, is a gym too, the will to improve, it's always an exercise for the next match.

Yes, sure.

What are the assets and defects of boxing with respect to other sports? Or what are its specific characteristics?

As an asset it's a means to make yourself known, to be seen and then it's up to you how and in what way you want to be seen. And the same thing is a defect.

The structure around boxing, the organization, federation: do you find it's up to what a boxer feels or wants?

The structure gives you something when you no longer need it, when you've made it, when you have some titles, only then do you begin to sense them. That's the Italian boxing federation: unless you're seen and make yourself known they won't back you. They could be a big help for the gyms, the decision to fund a certain gym and a certain number of boxers. There's millions for sport, but I don't know where it goes. If you're a new-comer or an amateur on the road you almost have to pay your way.

Giacobbe Fragoneri

Interview at the “Doria Boxing Team” club, Milan, May 30, 2002

I just became professional. I did my amateur career in Assisi and Fomina with two different trainers: one was Falcinelli, who is now president of the Boxing Federation, the other was Patrizio Oliva. With Oliva, I went to the Sydney Olympics in 2000. As an amateur my record is: European champion; second place in the world championships, I won the silver world cup in China and, as I said, I did the Olympics. I would have liked to win them but there were problems. Now it's a year since I turned professional and up till now I have done eight matches, all wins. Now I stopped because I had my hand operated on, I'm waiting for it to heal and then I'll start boxing again.

What kind of problems did you have at the Olympics?

Unfortunately in the amateur boxing world there's a kind of mafia with different countries using foul play to bring their boxers as close to the crown as possible. I think I annoyed them; I was a strong person and I caused problems. They continued to take me out by setting up my opponents to win. I think I'm the only boxer to lose a match 15 to 0 (the amateur point system is different from the professional system; in amateur there are three judges and for every hit they assign 1 point. 15-0 means not giving your opponent a single punch). And just think that with the bookmakers I was among the four favorites for the gold medal. The final went to an athlete from the Czech Republic, who I had beaten without a problem only a month before.

What satisfactions and difficulties have you had during your career?

The biggest difficulties have been this foul play: you win and you're better but they take you out, they send you away. This made me stop wanting to be amateur even though I would have liked to do the 2004 Olympics. I decided to go professional precisely because the point system is different. The difficulty now, as a professional, lies in the fact that in the beginning they have you fighting opponents who aren't at your level, so you win straight away but it doesn't serve you as experience. You win the first easily, you win the second easily... then with the fourth it begins to get a bit heavier and it's hard. You should start at your own level right away, a level that challenges you so that you can learn immediately. Then when you meet someone really strong, you are prepared, you don't have difficulty. I think this is the trouble with professional boxing in Italy.

Can you tell me about the atmosphere in the boxing gym, this place where you are continuously trying to improve through daily exercise. What do you think of it, what does it mean to you?

The atmosphere in the boxing gym is of a family environment, because everyone suf-

fers and this brings you together. Obviously you suffer intentionally, nobody forces you and it's something you want to do. Also, you have your companions who go to the same gym. You suffer with them and you stay by them. There isn't any envy: in fact the strong try to help the weak with their mistakes. There's always mutual respect; the champion and the amateur are on the same level. There isn't envy: you're strong; you're respected because you're strong and because you're strong, you can teach the weaker ones what you know. You see each other outside the gym too, you go out together. Sometimes a kid starts getting interested in boxing because he doesn't know what to do with his life, so he starts coming to the gym. Then, because it's a nice family atmosphere, he likes it and starts coming every day. He works out, comes to the gym and comes to see the other people who are working out like him. Like this, he doesn't throw himself away like other kids. Today we know that you can have everything you want, and that by having everything, you can get lost, so you smoke pot, you drink and get drunk. The gym is an instructive atmosphere because boxing, as opposed to what many think, is not a sport based on violence: you come to the gym to learn and to be better aware of yourself. When you learn to box you express your talent in the ring, not in the street. Of course there are people who come to the gym and they work out a few days just to say, “I'm a boxer”; these people aren't worth anything. The ones who stick around suffer, and they don't go out on the street to hit people and be violent. It's the opposite, boxing teaches you to be disciplined in the gym as well as in life, especially in life. I think I was one of those out on the street as a kid: I had fun, I was a jerk. Then the gym taught me respect for others and for myself. It's an important discipline, it goes to your heart and teaches you a lot of things, for this reason I don't want to just practice but also teach kids who come to the gym. These things serve you in life because just as you fight here, you fight outside the ring, in life, where the battle is even harder. Here at least there are rules, outside no, it's a jungle. So it's not true that boxing is a violent sport, in reality it's a highly disciplined sport. If you do stupid things, if you're not capable, you leave the gym, because here you have a hard time. It's easy to be a boxer out on the street, but try and go into the ring. Try and come here and work out every day: constantly on diets; no dates with girls; no going out, because you have to be careful about everything. You can't stay in closed rooms where there's smoking because you have to fight in the ring. It's a big sacrifice, especially for a young kid. Sometimes you have to go on a training retreat; you stay away from your family and your girl for a month and then maybe you lose in the end or they steal the match. It's hard, you have to be disciplined otherwise you'll find your problems in the ring.

What does your workout consist of?

When I'm preparing for a fight, I go running in the morning. I can do a long run, an hour, an hour and a half, or I start slowly and work progressively. Preferably I run in the hills, for this reason I go to Riccione. It's the best method because it's uphill where you

push yourself and then the downhill when you rest; you have to break the rhythm, like in boxing. In any case there are various running techniques, like the track for example, where you do spurts: you bring your breathing and heart beat to the same frequency as when you fight in the ring, where your heartbeat reaches 180-200 a minute. If a boxing round is three minutes, a spurt of 800 meters is the same as a three-minute round. If I'm preparing a six round match, I'll do six 800-meter spurts with a minute to recuperate between one and another like during a match. You have to stay within three minutes; it's very hard. In the afternoon I go to the gym, I do a warm up to get started and to avoid pulling muscles. Then I do weights, skipping, sit-ups and the punch bag. There are various methods such as doing all these exercises one after another, only for a few seconds, giving your all, which is what I usually do the first day in the gym. Actually workouts in the gym vary from day to day. The next time I spar with a sparring partner, trying out the things I'll have to do in the ring: it's a simulation of a fight. Then I'll do the punch bag and shadow boxing (simulating a fight alone, with an imaginary opponent, punching into the air, generally used to loosen muscles). Thursday I only do weights. These are the three workout methods that I combine during the week. Only the morning is always the same with running, which is the basis for an athlete.

How many people follow you in your activity?

I have a manager and a trainer, whose name is Tazzi, here at "Doria". Then I have an athletic coach, but generally I base myself on the training methods that the national team use. They were adapted for two minutes, which is the duration of a round for amateurs, whereas professionals use three minutes. However, you work out so much that it functions well for professionals too. A technical difference between amateur and professional is that the amateurs are much quicker because they have to do everything in four two minute rounds whereas professionals have many more rounds and you begin to warm up at the fourth round. I am like a diesel engine, I begin to reach the peak of my performance towards the seventh, eighth round, then I really come into my own. In fact I win matches for just this reason: when the others are getting tired I start to get going.

How do you see boxing in relation to other types of sport, what are its' essential characteristics?

The boxing gym forms character because anyway you have to have character to go ahead with this kind of exercise even on an amateur level. The quality of the workout is good. Cycling and swimming are at a good level as well, in this case too you move your entire body, they're all individual sports involving sacrifice. The only team sport that gives you a lot of discipline is rugby and that's also a hard, gruelling sport. In a way rugby is the same as other individual and self sacrificing sports, but you are in a group. You find the same extreme effort, the same idea of fighting with yourself that you find in boxing, swimming and cycling. Anyway, I respect all sports even if it's boxing where

you get hit. Cycling and swimming are extremely tiring but at least you don't get hit. In the end when you get hit it's another thing. It's easy to dole out punches but to receive them? We are all capable of punching but when you get hit it's a lot different: can you put up with it'?

Are there television, radio programs and magazines that deal with and follow boxing?

Now several combat sports are becoming very popular: kick boxing, Thai boxing... In our field there is "Boxe Ring", a specialized magazine about boxing that comes out now and then. Then there is "Samurai", a general combat sports magazine but with a supplement dedicated to boxing inside. On television they only show boxing late at night and only Italian, European or world titles; all the other matches are ignored. This happens even when they're showing you football matches of polar bears playing penguins in the North Pole that took place ten years ago! In other countries, like Germany or England, boxing is followed more than in Italy, also on television. Here it isn't followed; this is an Italian phenomenon. And the prevailing sport, almost everywhere, is always this stupid football which has become a disaster in the last ten years with all the money they've put into it. Anyway boxing isn't what it used to be. I know I'm talking badly about my sport and throwing fuel on the fire, but unfortunately it's the truth. Even Rino Tommasi, one of the most famous boxing journalists, talks badly about boxing today, especially because now there are several more or less prestigious boxing organisations. Once, there was only the W.B.C., and only one world champion. Then they made it so that everyone fought under different organisations with different champions. They created a commercial system which is no longer real or authentic.

On a personal level how has boxing changed you?

It's changed me completely. It has formed my body, my character; it's given me a lot of discipline and in my own way a bit of popularity. What can I say, it's radically changed my life. I don't know if anything else could have changed me as much as boxing. When I began to go to the gym, I thought I'd do it for pleasure: I had my job, my family and I'd go to the gym for relaxation. At the beginning I went to the gym, maybe this will make you laugh, only to lose weight. I would never have thought about becoming European Champion or being placed second in the world championships.

Did these changes happen quickly?

I gave it my all, whatever I was doing I thought only about boxing. I even changed my job because what I was doing was too hard and in the gym I couldn't do my best so I became an assistant chef. Then I entered the national team and I gave everything up. I only did boxing, and it wasn't at all easy to give everything up. I was in the national team for ten years, staying away a month, back home a week and then away another

month again. I even worked nights to have the day free to work out. Even now that I'm professional and as a professional you can't make a living, I look for jobs that will allow me to go running in the morning, work in the afternoon and go to the gym in the evening. But it's good, it changed my face too, now I have this nose... Not even women give me the satisfaction that victory in a match gives me. When I went up to the podium for the national team in Sydney and heard the Italian anthem, I almost wet myself because of the emotion. You can't imagine what it means to go to another part of the world to represent Italy at the Olympics.

What does boxing mean for you?

I'll tell you in a word: life. There's nothing that gives you as much as boxing. There are a lot of amateurs, of all ages, who want to try the excitement of the ring. When they experience this sensation they can't let go anymore and the gyms are full because of this. When you discover this sport and see how it gets to you, it might seem strange, but you can't let go. I've tried a lot of sports: I've done football, swimming, rugby and I tried cycling but I needed a steel bike because I was too heavy. However, the excitement this sport gives me is unique. Boxing is love and hate for me: it's everything because I give it my all.

How old were you when you began?

Now I'm thirty-three. I began at twenty and I began fighting at twenty-two. You could say I was a natural talent because after a year I was already in the national team.

When can you go for the Italian title?

If all goes well, in December, due to the operation I had to do on my hand. I was operated on in the beginning of May, I have to do rehabilitation, then work out and in September I can start punching again. In October I'll do a comeback match, in December the Italian title and then I'll throw myself into the European championships. In January I have an opportunity to go to the United States. I spoke with an American manager and it seems that the Americans like my boxing style and they want me to try America. In any case, America will be a good experience; there's boxing everywhere but in America there's really a lot of space. In America there are lots of boxers whereas in Italy, including all the categories, there are only a hundred professionals. In my category for example there are four of us and we have to meet together or, as often happens, we have to call in foreigners. I don't know why boxing isn't given proper consideration in Italy. If parents send their kids to do a sport they do football, swimming, tennis. They have this idea that boxing is violent when it is actually a very particular sport. If you go to Thailand, the kids do Thai boxing in the streets, which is their combat discipline. In Cuba it's the same: the kids do boxing in the street instead of football, it's another mentality. In our schools boxing doesn't exist, there's only football and gymnastics, just as there

isn't English and they don't teach you the road signs... They don't teach a lot of things that are taught in other countries. I'm quite ignorant, I'm the classic ignorant boxer, I don't speak English because I didn't want to study it, but if they had instilled it as a child in school, maybe by now I'd speak it. In other countries they know English, French and Italian. You have to give kid lots of different possibilities, it's important. I think that society is afraid of boxing. The idea that two people confront each other face to face in the ring bothers them. I'm sorry about this because boxing is a great discipline with a beautiful name: they call it the "noble art", and it is just that, it's an art. So meone says: "look at those two idiots fighting each other", but if you understand this discipline you understand all that fighting entails. Technically, in boxing, there are three punches that you can use: the direct, the hook and the uppercut. These three punches are combined, a bit like manoeuvring a bulldozer with different levers. You have to be able to duck the punches, to take them and to come back. You have to be able to do this, it's a mental thing. That's why it's sport and not violence. It's a sport of great sacrifice, you aren't false and you can't be false because when you are in the ring you pay for falseness. I'm like that, I'm myself, I don't have anything to hide; if you want me I'm like that, if you don't want me turn your head and go the other way. I come here to the gym, I do my sports, I have my girlfriend and I don't do any harm to anyone. However, even if your son takes drugs it's okay if he wears a jacket and tie. Today we live by image and unfortunately boxing has a bad image.

Vincenzo Gigliotti

Interview at the “Associazione Boxe Voghera”, Voghera, June 21, 2002

I began to box very young, I was twelve years old. I immediately did cadet and Italian championships and I did pretty well. Then I was a novice and won tournaments on a national level and they called me to the nationals where I participated in an international tournament and international junior championships in Peru. I did the first division Italian championship three times; unfortunately I always came in second. Then I moved to professionals. After twelve matches as professional I went for the Italian title in '97 and beat Di Meco by a knock out in the second round becoming the Italian featherweight champion. I defended the title five times; always winning fights before the limit. I fought featherweight in the WBU world championship losing for points to Contreras. I did the WBA intercontinental winning last year and won once and lost the following match in December. Now I'm about to go for the European title.

What have been the difficulties and satisfactions in your career?

In terms of satisfactions this sport is highly selective and very personal, I mean: you're the one to go into the ring. So when you win, the satisfaction is immense. As for the difficulties, boxing isn't an easy environment; you have to deal with lots of people and each has his point of view and you don't always get along. This is one of the difficulties. The greatest, as far as I'm concerned, is the fact that I work. Unfortunately but fortunately, I have a construction company that does fairly well. In Italy today, boxing isn't the oasis that everyone imagines. People see soccer players and what they earn but boxing isn't like that. Today the European title gets you twenty million lira and a world is sixty whereas in soccer for the Italian title alone you get several billion. As a result, for me, the most difficult thing is to reconcile work and training. It's not by chance that two losses in the world with Contreras and the intercontinental depended a lot on this factor.

Can you tell me about the gym atmosphere, this place where you continuously improve through daily exercise. How do you view it, what does it mean to you?

Let's talk about the gym I go to. Here the atmosphere is good; I find it one of the best gyms. Not by chance, there is a trainer, Livio Lucarno, who's had success: he worked with Giovanni Parisi, Gigliotti, and other “little champs” who for various reasons didn't continue but they had all the potential to make it. For three years I've been training with Luciano Bernini, another very good trainer. Here the atmosphere is good; in fact as long as Parisi was here it was super good. You know a champion who gets the show on the road and the interest of television and papers... It was really fine. At the gym, what can I tell you: I come here only because it's a passion. I'm not a great champion

like Parisi and I don't know if I ever will be. However when he was here you breathed a different atmosphere. I'm a homebody, like they say, just home, gym and work. Still this gym is one of the best, both on a technical level and for the atmosphere. There are several gyms in Italy that I would classify squalid both for the way of thinking and the type of training they use.

What is the importance of victory for you?

Victory is strange to decipher because the moment you win, you feel like you own the world. Then there's the recompense and the sacrifices you make. Victory is everything, without victory you can't go on.

And the importance of defeat?

It depends on the defeat. If for example, your adversary is better than you and he beats you on equal ground, using good sportsmanship, you can digest the loss well. If he was stronger, too bad, that's how it goes. On the other hand I have trouble swallowing my losses because they almost always come about for secondary reasons that leave me with a lot of regret.

What makes a man go into the ring to meet another man one to one?

As far as I'm concerned it certainly isn't the desire to destroy your adversary and it isn't even hate. I'm a very tranquil person, I work and I have my business. Certainly I don't like it if they step on my toes but that doesn't mean I put up my fists in the street. I believe the desire to emerge, to come out of anonymity leads you to the ring. I think that people in Italy box for this reason only, because in terms of money we don't get much.. Everyone always hopes to have a big match, to go on television, to become known to a broader public.

What is your rapport with other boxers? I mean boxers outside of this gym, your adversaries.

Between Italians, we more or less all know each other. There is respect and friendship. In fact, the last match I had in March was with my friend D'Arcangelo, and damn it...he was hard to finish off. For a minute I thought I'd end up the match with points and then the final blow came and that was it. With foreign adversaries you are more geared up, especially with the French or English who have a strange behavior with Italians, it almost seems like they hate us. When they come to Italy they have an attitude that most of the time I don't like. Then, in that case, there can be some friction.

What is the rapport between boxing and violence?

To say that boxing isn't violent wouldn't be exactly correct. In the end you do throw

punches. More than anything else, the mentality when you go into the ring shouldn't be violent. I don't go into the ring to chew my adversary's ear. I go mainly to show my technique and physical strength together with my intelligence. So, for me, going to the ring to throw punches with another athlete isn't violent. Probably it's more violent what you see on the soccer field, when they push and kick; I don't know how they get to that point. They're playing ball, not boxing. Some basketball or hockey players elbow, I think this is violence. In boxing, the sport itself is like that.

What are the pluses and minuses of boxing with respect to other sports?

Maybe I lean too far to one side, but there is no sport or athlete like boxing. The only sport that comes close in terms of sacrifice, character and temperament is bicycling. Now we see the storm over doping. Soon we'll see what happens with soccer players. The plus of boxing is that a boxer is a very stubborn person, he can hold out, and except in specific cases like Tyson, they are always fairly loyal athletes: in the ring they throw punches but at the same time they never have reactions that go beyond the rules of the game. As far as defects, they have always accused us of having little culture; this is a preconceived notion that shouldn't exist. A boxer is a type of person it might be better to leave alone, not bother too much. But I see that even other boxers, my colleagues, have changed as people. Now we try to have a dialogue first.

Today, before coming to Voghera, I exchanged two words with my neighbor and I explained this work I'm doing on boxing. His reaction was immediate, almost angry; he didn't want to hear anything about boxing; it's a violent, vulgar sport. I asked if he had ever had anything to do with boxing, if he had ever spoken to a boxer, visited a gym or seen a match and he said no. What do you think?

I can't say anything at the moment because I don't know the person. One should see what he does in life: if, for example, he's a priest, I can understand his being against boxing. I don't think you should ever judge because you never know what's behind the scenes, what's behind things. There is a whole category of people who are used to resolving their problems by going to a lawyer. I think someone who is a boxer is an honest, loyal man, if he has something to say he says it to your face and before going to a lawyer he tries to resolve the problem in another manner, with dialogue. If someone who has never seen a match criticizes this sport and labels it violent that means he is a biased person and you can't say anything.

How has boxing changed you?

It's calmed me down a bit, as a kid I was a pain. I think it helped me grow up well; when I was fourteen I began to do the nationals at Assisi, I was there for nearly three years; I saw different countries and got to know other situations and cultures. I had to live with other people and had to have respect for them and their things too. I think bo-

boxing brought me up well.

A question about the media, the way they often see and present boxing according to a highly stereotyped, partial and simplistic version of the thing, which doesn't really correspond to reality. Why does this happen according to you?

The media approach to this sport is very negative; I will give you a specific example. You may remember the issue of Fabrizio Di Chiara, the boxer who died several years ago. Fabrizio was also a good friend of mine; we went through the nationals together. This event was publicized in an incredible manner on the first page of all the newspapers, the "Corriere", the "Gazzetta" and so forth. Certainly you had to talk about it but to remember the athlete, not to fault boxing like they did. Then a week later a goalie for Palermo died: playing soccer he got into a fight and ended up with a brain hemorrhage and died. In the papers the news was reported in a few meager lines. This proves how boxing, as a sport, is considered at fault. Then we have the Church against us, politically we're nowhere, no big politician supports us. We have become the scapegoat anytime something happens. Just think of those boxers, only a few to tell the truth, who are into drugs: they are taken to task immediately by the media whereas in other sports these facts are hidden by I don't know who. This happens because we are too weak politically; we are nothing and for this boxing is dying. Today everything is a business and unfortunately everything is controlled by soccer, the few crumbs that remain are divided between volleyball and basketball and then there's nothing left for anyone else.

How would you describe boxing, what is your personal idea of boxing, what is it for you?

Boxing is strength, intelligence and elegance for me. In the ring Parisi had all these qualities: elegance, potency, fantasy and intelligence. At a certain level a boxer has to have a great personality, like the medieval knights.

In terms of the structure surrounding boxing, the federation, does it satisfy the boxer's needs? Do you think that something more could be done, and where?

The Italian boxing federation doesn't satisfy our needs at all. It doesn't count at all. In addition, especially professionals aren't supported. In my case, for example, last March I defended the Italian title and on June 21 they told me I would fight again, but it wasn't so. They moved the date telling me the European title was in the beginning of August, now they have moved it to between September and October... You understand that six, seven months pass and I should always be a hundred percent which is impossible without a match. Unfortunately there is nothing I can do about it. I'm bound by a contract, they don't pay me: boxers are paid for a match, this is bad but if you're stalled seven months you don't receive anything. We have no support now. What should be done? I repeat,

we need a politician with pull in government who can defend us, and above all we need boxers, ex-boxers working within the federation. Now there are lawyers managing the federation: what does a lawyer know about what we want and what we need, about what a boxer feels?

Vincenzo Imperato

Interview at the "Accademia Pugilistica Vigevanese", Vigevano, June 2, 2002

I began boxing when I was fifteen. My first matches were as a novice, then I moved on to amateur. As amateur I fought seventy-five, eighty matches. I won sixty: five ties and about fifteen losses. Then I joined the nationals. I was reserve for the Olympics in Barcelona and then in '93 I went professional. I won the second division Italian championship in '94. Then I moved to first division and won the Italian championship in '96, which I've maintained until today. I won an intercontinental championship and I did the European championship in Germany losing to points. On July 5th I will defend the Italian title and then I will see what to do. If I manage to keep the title I hope to go for the European championship. We'll see; it all depends on July 5th.

What difficulties and satisfactions have you found in this job?

There are loads of difficulties; anyone in boxing inevitably meets up with a lot of difficulty. First of all the preparation is really hard, there's always suffering. If you've experienced suffering in life then you can become a boxer. The difficulties lie more in the training than in the final match. If the training preparation is good, you can summit the match without any difficulty. You have to be very well prepared. One of the difficulties is due to the fact that this sport isn't promoted on television. Even now, for the world championship: soccer, soccer, soccer... We saw how they did in the nationals, how the games went, the unfair umpires. Do you win because you're better or because you had a good political recommendation? I think they're exaggerating with soccer. If the media gave a hand to boxing surely there would be more kids in the gym and there would be more boxers. I see how abroad the situation is better, there are a lot of boxing sponsors and many matches are transmitted on television at a decent hour. This gives people who don't know anything about boxing a chance to understand it. In Italy we keep seeing soccer and by now we're fed up, sincerely I'm sick of soccer. I'd prefer to see athletics or other sports. As far as I'm concerned, you fight to win and you win for yourself: what you accomplish in boxing you do by yourself and with your coach so in the end the satisfaction is greater. I've had a lot of satisfaction. As I said, I'm the Italian champion; I went for the European championship and I did the Olympics as amateur...I've had a lot of satisfaction, as an amateur and now as a professional.

I believe one of the problems with boxing is the fact that it's not talked about and when it is, often people speak badly without knowing the cause, without any knowledge. I think there is a great diversity between what boxing really is and what the media presents to the public.

Right. They show certain matches, with Tyson for example, where the boxer is a nasty, ill-famed, robber and rapist who causes trouble. They only grant space to this kind of match and as a result people think that all boxing is like that but it isn't so. True boxing is an art; it is the "noble art". We saw Tyson against Lewis: Tyson should have destroyed him, he said he'd eat his brain. Then we saw how technique came out on top, the intelligent, more serious boxer won. Boxing is a serious thing. On television they present the nasty, ugly image of the boxer. They should go to a gym instead and see what boxing really is about, because in Italy no one understands. They should see how a boxer works out, how he lives and works. A professional boxer, even at the top level can't live from boxing alone. I work, I have my job. I'm a boxer because I like it, it's fun; I do it for pleasure. When it's no longer fun I won't do it. Boxing should be made known through the media, television and the schools.

How is the atmosphere in the gym? How would you describe it?

Here you find people that aren't only boxers. There are kids that work out to stay in shape. The atmosphere in the gym is healthy, it's a clean atmosphere. People who aren't clean don't come to the gym because here you work and sweat.

What is the value of victory?

Victory is fundamental: if you win you can go forward, it gives you the stimulus to affront other matches, more important matches, where you can understand your body better and put your preparation to the test. Victory moves you forward. In boxing it is important to win, and not just participate as in other sports. It is important to win because if you lose you get clobbered and the punches hurt. That's the reality.

What is the value of defeat? I imagine that also has a very important role.

You have to accept defeat because it teaches you a lot of things: it teaches you to mature, to grow. If your adversary is better, tip your hat, you really respect him. Victory is important but defeat teaches you a lot of things, it puts you to the test, it develops character to help you continue. You have to find the strength to get up, start training again and go on. Defeat is part of the game, even for great champions. If you always win, in the end maybe you lose a match and you can't hack it: you don't understand why and you can't get it together because you've never lost before; you don't know what it means and as a result you don't know how to react positively after a match goes badly.

What sort of rapport do you boxers have?

We Italian boxers know each other in the context of the various reunions. Usually we don't go out together because the gyms are quite distant from each other. However it's an easy, nice rapport. We are all friends. In boxing there is no hate or envy between the gyms. Each person does his job and may the best man win. It might even happen that

friends fight sometimes.

How is it fighting with a friend in an official match?

Outside the ring we're chums but when you meet in the ring you are no longer friends. These are the two different faces of two relationships. You fight to win, to show your technique, strength, superiority and to show your training in a confrontation between you and your friend, your adversary. So in the ring there isn't friendship, you go to win in the ring.

Don't you find difficulty reconciling the two things or once you're in the ring, it's the ring and that's all?

No, there's no difficulty. If you go to work out that's one thing, but if you go for an official match there are no friends, even your mother, father or brother don't exist. I've even sparred with my brother.

How many people follow your activity and what role do they have?

I have my trainer, Ciro Coperti, who has always been with me; we are together eighteen years and that's it. I have my trainer and my friends as sparring partners, Pisapia and other amateur boxers. Then there is Giardini, Tagliatella, Tasso, Maldini... the guys that go to the gym. Then there's my manager, Loreni, who organizes the matches. Even during the match, in the corner, it's just me and my trainer. That's it, we don't want anyone else, we don't need anyone. We have always gone ahead alone and on our own we've reached the world championship level.

What is the rapport between boxing and violence?

Violence and boxing are two different things. I think that everyone is born with a bit of nastiness, aggressiveness, a bit of grit and violence: we all have it in us. If you don't have grit you can't even manage to live; to live you have to have determination. Violence is something else and it doesn't exist in boxing. In boxing there is determination, the desire to emerge. Violence is what happens in war, where they rape and kill. I don't know what significance violence has in sport; a violent person isn't all there.

Talking with several boxers over these months, I have seen that another important aspect in boxing is respect.

Certainly, respect for your adversary. Whoever makes it to the ring is to be admired because not everyone can get up in the ring, it's not for everyone, it takes courage. If you don't respect your opponent you aren't a real boxer.

How has boxing changed you?

It taught me to live, to make sacrifices, to grit my teeth, even in daily life. It taught me

to go on, to pick myself back up in difficult moments. There can be moments in life, when a person finds himself in difficulty. Boxing has helped me overcome these difficult moments, slowly, slowly, calmly. It has helped me to go on.

What is the ring for you? A stage, a place where you can test yourself?

It's a place where I try and meet with other people. Certainly, it could also be a stage because boxing is a performance where people watch, admire and enjoy boxing. For boxers it is a place where two people meet, they confront each other and test their own talent, they test themselves man to man. It's the ring, with two equally armed people facing each other, they meet following the rules and surely the strongest and better trained, the fastest, the most potent and the smartest wins. When you meet, you show all your talent, in the ring you want to show your superiority with respect to your adversary. For boxers it is a confrontation, for the spectator it could be seen as a stage where you go to admire a man to man battle.

As to the boxing structure, do you think it satisfies the needs of the boxer? Do you think more could be done and where?

Certainly something more could be done. They could increase the purse, both at an amateur level and for professionals. They should establish an adequate purse for the Italian championships, for example. It should be an amount that allows you to put something aside. I don't know what amateurs get an hour, but it should give them the possibility with two or three matches a month to put something aside, even a bare minimum, something symbolic. For professional boxers the purse should be increased and it is correct to keep that figure. For example, the Italian championship brings in twenty, thirty million: 60% goes to the champion, 40% to the challenger, and these figures must be met. If an organizer can't find twenty million for an Italian championship, than forget it. Instead they always try to tighten the belt, to give us less. The federation should impose a precise figure, which should be respected; in this way surely we could work better and resolve a lot of problems.

With what frequency do you fight?

It depends. I defend the Italian title every three, four months. So I fight three, four matches a year for the title. Lately I've only done titles.

What do you do between one match and another?

I keep in shape; I always go to the gym, even if not as intensely as now when I'm preparing a match. In any case I work out regularly every day, I go running; I never stop completely. I stopped now because I had an accident and it takes twenty days to heal, but normally I never stop, I'm always doing something.

Luciano Lombardi

Interview at Velate, May 23, 2002

I've prepared some questions, or better, a list of points I want to touch.

Yes, yes, because I don't know what to say so if you ask me questions I'll answer; and I'll answer the questions I want to answer. It's always like that, the same with women.

You can begin with an introduction; tell me what you've done?

I'm 27, I should say unfortunately. I'm a professional boxer and in the dead moments, when I'm not in preparation and keeping in shape I have an office job. This is because in Italy you necessarily have to have a second job. The Italian situation, with all the attention soccer gets, forces boxers to work unless they become world champions and then maybe they can support themselves. I began at 17, really late. This is because there is little promotion for boxing here up north, in the south the situation is even worse, there's a gym every twenty, twenty-five kilometers. Since there are plenty of churchyards and soccer fields of course everyone plays soccer, they certainly don't start boxing. I was one of those guys who always get in trouble, with everyone. Living here in Brianza, especially in this part of Brianza there is still a real backward mentality. We were immigrants, my parents come from the south and when we came to this town we were considered southerners and there was always fighting with the townspeople. You had to gain their esteem and I was one of those who were always getting into trouble. If I fought and got licked at home I got it because I was fighting and then again because I'd been licked. So I started to do kick boxing. I was good at it and in fact after a short time at the gym, they immediately got me my first match. I did well, sometimes I won something. Then there was the tournament for the European championship. I was chosen to participate and in order to improve my arm technique I enrolled in a boxing course. I asked around and found a gym twenty kilometers from home. At the time I already had a scooter and I could get around independently. Certainly if there had been a gym right next door I could have started boxing at fourteen which is a lot different than beginning at seventeen. That's how I began training as a boxer. I did the kick boxing tournament and I did well, I became European champion. In the boxing gym they saw I did well, that I had talent and they convinced me to remain and become a boxer. I also liked the training, it was a work out where you suffer a lot, and you sweat. In kick boxing and other combat sports you do gymnastics and you do other things too but in boxing I saw that you suffered more. The type of work out was much harder and more complete. Sometimes you felt bad because in the boxing gym they don't treat you with kid gloves but like a man. They treat you like a normal person. If you can hack it you keep up when they're running well, if not, you have to make do and let the others go. So naturally, a bit from pride a bit from shame slowly, slowly you mature. Then later I had an

accident, I broke my legs and an arm and I was stuck for more than a year. After this pause I saw the results began coming, I liked the training and I began to box exclusively, things were coming up, they interested me and there was the goal of the nationals. Then it became a job and here I am. That's making it brief, if not...

Can you tell me about the gym, this place where you're always trying to improve with daily exercise. How do you find it, how is it for you?

If I try to remember the day when I went for the first time to the gym it really was a strange environment. You have in your mind all the things they say about boxing, about the mafia, that the matches are rigged, all that kind of thing. You go in and see that the gym is a cellar, you smell the odor of the bags ... and in your head you always have the negative idea of how society presents the boxing world. So you start out with a preconceived idea because you believe all the things they say. You may even have doubts: maybe they want to give you a normal mineral supplement and you think they want to give you who knows what. When you know a little more about it you realize that the environment is made up of guys like you. I was part of that environment a lot, I met some amateur boxers who could never become a champion and others who came to the gym just to stay in shape and all these guys were all right. It's just as my doctor says: there aren't any nasty boxers. Then over the years, during work or in competition; envy, jealousy or spite can come in. Sometimes you take some punches in training and you get hurt so the next day you try to dole them out, you get him back technically, without ever being incorrect and that's it. In these situations there is always respect and friendship. In the ring there is the competition which is different. In the ring your friend can hurt you and not even say he's sorry but outside of the ring you help each other when there are problems. A nice thing about boxing is there isn't a nasty boxer; there isn't a boxer who won't help the other. Unfortunately, as I said, other things can come in: you start to do better and envy arises, people talk... A boxer is an athlete who is used to suffer, he understands suffering and he suffers on his own, at times he's ripped off. They take away your match after months of training and effort or maybe you have a fight with your girl because you've neglected her due to your activity or because you're tense and you're not aware of things. Maybe you isolated yourself for two months which means no discotheque, no friends and it also means going to bed at eleven on Friday and Saturday nights. At sixteen you begin to deprive yourself of some things that the future and life can no longer give you. In a certain sense a boxer is also stupid because for him it's enough just to win a match. The glory and newspaper headlines would be enough for him. It's not even the money that makes him do what he does and that's the stupidity of boxers who will even fight for free. So sometimes you get ripped off, maybe they steal a match from you or the day before a match you get hurt but after two months of sacrifices you don't want to say no, you want to fight anyway and it is inevitable that the fight will be a delusion. Some who are deluded say to hell with it be-

cause they don't believe in it anymore, they don't have the stuff and then there are others who pick themselves up, as has often happened to me, even recently. You have to get over it, get your head together and try not to do other stupid things, not to let yourself go, take ten days off and then start all over again with conviction. You have to start running in the morning again, find your drive, your goal. You have to try and understand how this situation came to be and figure out how to react. I don't think people understand all these things and then they make a partial judgment of boxing. If people were informed about these things, their way of seeing boxing or a match on television would be quite different. Not like now; as soon as a boxer does something, he goes to prison, then come the newspaper headlines and people's negative judgment. How many other athletes go to prison, but it's always the boxer who gets put down because his job is throwing punches. Certainly he throws punches but he has technique, there is respect and loyalty. In addition boxing has ancient, noble origins. The "noble art" was invented in England where only the rich could afford lessons in boxing. Today boxing is debased, under accusation even though, for example, there has never been a case of doping. Yes, maybe they steal your match, but this happens everywhere, they've always cheated in soccer, but especially boxing has this reputation.

Certainly boxing in particular has a negative reputation. The cliché of the violent, ignorant boxer is more often due to ignorance; people speaking without a minimum understanding of the subject because they've never gone to a gym or seen a match.

I go to the office in a jacket and tie and during my eight hours there I'm well-behaved, I respect people who merit respect. I went hungry training in Cuba, in America there's money but people work hard and in Milan everybody's a pretty little boy and no one has a goal; they only want to say "I'm going to be a boxer". Everywhere I was respected and respectful. Certainly I'm capable of saying good morning and good evening, but I can also give you a kick in the butt if you don't respect me. Maybe someone without courage is submissive and is considered a good person merely because he submits. To punch and not get punched isn't easy, you have to hit but you get hit at the same time, that's part of the game. From my point of view, the mere fact that a person goes behind the ropes to affront another man merits respect. This is true if he's hopeless or a champion. I don't think the fact that you go into the ring and try to avoid punches and punch your adversary back means you lack intelligence and reason. It isn't so easy to throw punches, it takes talent. But in Italy this talent isn't appreciated. You can tell by the fact that in Italy as a professional boxer, I have to work. If a soccer player works full time, aside from all the money he makes and the fact that in my view he's worth half a lot of the others: boxers, swimmers or what not, he's a good person, he's intelligent, he's a model, he should be in TV serials. A boxer works full time, without a

parallel activity and he's a delinquent because he's only a boxer. Thus a boxer is forced, merely for a question of image, to work. Then they say "he works, so he's a good guy" or "he's a prick but at least he works". If you box full time, you're automatically seen as a guy who picks quarrels because society and the media impose a stereotype image of the delinquent boxer. If a soccer player is caught up in a cocaine scandal or something like that, the papers talk about it for ten days and that's it, everyone forgets about it. If a boxer does something less serious he is immediately criticized and comes under heavy attack. The problem in the end is always the same, you're immediately pigeon holed in a certain way. On the other hand boxers in America, take De La Hoya for example, are followed and respected both as people and as athletes so on the job they are more tranquil and this is important. The other day I was in the gym and they were saying that in Italy there's no one outstanding, not a single person. In America I was sparring partner for important boxers and they complimented me, but if you say this they criticize you, "who does he think he is?"; you seem to be a braggart. It's already hard to work and then you have to struggle every day with these things and you don't have the necessary tranquility because the tensions don't allow you to work as you should. This leads you to make mistakes and lose out on opportunities. In addition to working out, interior tranquility and the psychological aspect are very important factors. Even a mathematician when his mind isn't free, if he has to add one and one he can't do the calculation: he can't even find the solution to an easy problem. My best matches have been when I had the right people beside me, people who set me at ease psychologically. So now you can understand and evaluate what a boxer has to support in terms of physical and mental suffering. Some can hack it, the fortunate ones with character and drive, and others can't hack it. You will always have difficulties because today you're the boxer but then the next day they give you a kick in the pants; they set you aside and try to build up another and you're aware of this. Then there's the fear and tension of making a mistake because boxers have no margin of error; if you lose you have to start all over again and that's not easy. The tension runs very high. You win ten matches and they remember only the single loss. Boxing is like that.

In fact, one of the aspects that interest me in this discipline is that whoever makes it, especially in Italy, is totally convinced of what he does, he believes in the activity he's chosen. Boxing becomes his personal credo.

Anyone who is a boxer in Italy is crazy. When you've gotten this far, if you think about it, you're crazy and for people you're stupid. At times you believe them too and you ask yourself "who got me into this? I'm young, I could have the women I want, live as I please, who's got me sweating, suffering, sacrificing myself like this. For what?" Anyone boxing in Italy is crazy. If you're boxing in Cuba you're not crazy because you have the possibility of making it and you're respected and well considered. A champion in Cuba can eat, has his house, so he's not crazy. In Italy agents rob the television rights

and they give you no support or they put you on rerun, the papers don't give you any space, anyone boxing in Italy is crazy and a masochist. We have had great boxers but they ruined us; wonder who it was. This happens because on a political level we have no support. Before, it was different. La Rocca, for example, was made by a politician, I don't want to say something wrong now but it seems to me it was Pertini. We had Giovanni Parisi, a great friend, who brought boxing to a very high level. We had Benvenuti, Calambai, they remember them even in America, they know who they are, and then Damiani... unfortunately now the situation is quite different. I'm known around here, everyone knows who I am and where I live, but it doesn't help because you always have trouble making it to the end of the month even if you're one of the five best boxers in Italy. That's the reason I'm looking into the possibilities in America, but you know what this means and what it entails: it means getting your things together and going there, in a world where you don't belong, where the competition is fierce, where you're alone and you're not at home.

You're going to Las Vegas you were telling me.

Yes, I'm going to fight in Las Vegas, I've knocked on the door several times and now I'm going. But I have to go there myself and take what I want, I have to invest and risk first hand, no one is giving me anything. Then I'll come back to Italy and there's always envy and jealousy...how can you go on when there's no pride in your athletes, in your country? In Cuba they are nationalistic, they know everything: they even know their national champions in boxing. In Italy we are too defeatist. Look at Hollywood: in reality it has a bad reputation but abroad it is promoted as a paradise with the premier film gatas, the famous actors. Here in Italy we have our monuments, our history and culture but we don't valorize what we have, we only look at the negative aspects. We aren't proud of our things, or we are only when it's handy for us. That's why many things don't go forward in Italy and boxing is one of them along with some other sports.

What is the situation on a European level?

On a European level boxing is doing well except for the Eastern countries, the poor countries although they do have payback on an amateur level and if you are a champion you're treated well, people respect you, they help you because you're an Olympic. In Germany, boxing is doing very well also in France and England. In this case boxing is supported by the media, by television and sponsors. You almost never see boxing on television in Italy. In Parliament a member of AN lamented to the RAI national network because they didn't give any space to boxing. When Benvenuti fought against Griffith for the middle weight title at Madison Square Gardens in New York they had to let the workers follow the match on the radio for fear of a national strike. Boxing is being ruined by the media.

The cliché of the ignorant and violent boxer is hard to die.

Certainly. I know what I want, maybe I don't have the right dialectic to express it correctly but I know what I want. I wasn't in university maintained by my parents until I was forty but I know what I want.

This strong conviction in your ideas, in what you do, does it come from boxing, from the type of training you have to follow and the type of mentality you must have when you are in the ring?

I don't know because I've had a particular life so I don't know if it derives from boxing or from what I experienced. I lost my mother when I was very young and boxing was the only thing I could do and I was good at. I have other qualities but at the moment I feel like doing this, I believe in this notwithstanding the delusions, even if boxing never betrayed me and never will betray me because it all depends on me. My wife or my girl could betray me, but boxing will never betray me. More than once I've been betrayed by several men involved in boxing by the associations, trainers or directors but boxing has never betrayed me. It's given me a lot, it helped me understand things and it helped me overcome bad moments. Maybe it won't get me money, it won't get me a house by the sea or a Porsche but it has left me something more important: maturation, my growth, it helped me avoid delinquency or other things. I was left alone at twenty without anyone to rely on, I don't know how a kid at that age can affront things. Now I see several of my friends from back then, maybe they had parents that helped them, now I see how they've ended up. Boxing gave me something in terms of education as well. It is a sport based on suffering, suffering and suffering; when you suffer a lot you learn. If you're in the ring and you can't take it anymore but you have to react, you have to find the drive, it becomes a mental factor, you find the strength to react in your mind. In boxing, in my job, I risk my life. You risk your life in other fields but in that case, for example the engine can betray you, in boxing no one can betray you. In boxing you have to be humble, because if you aren't, you'll learn some lessons in the ring that you'll remember for quite a while; either you learn humility or you leave the gym. When you practice a sport your character is reflected in what you do. This happens especially in boxing which is the best sport because it builds character and makes you a man. Your way of being is reflected in the ring and with sacrifice and suffering, you logically have a different vision of life and its problems. This is why sometimes people have a first impression that you are impetuous: it seems you put on airs, that you're a boor, but being genuine and spontaneous comes from what you do. They don't see what's behind things. Just look at soccer players, they're always hurt. I can also get hurt, but the next day I'm in the gym with my arm in a cast and I do what I can. They get hurt and take months to convalesce with millions. They're always hurt; always hurt and they aren't boxers. I take the punches and I'm here. Boxing creates problems in your personal life too. Your girl, your wife - on this count I've talked with various champions and I have

discovered that they have the same problems - people can't understand how you can love boxing, because it is love we are talking about. She says you care more about boxing than her; it's not that, boxing gives me the satisfaction of personal realization. If you love me, stay beside me; put me at ease and when I go into the ring you should fight with me. Then traveling, concentration, you have to go to bed early, you can't go to restaurants often because you have to make weight, but you never do anything wrong. Certainly it's difficult, but she's your companion and has to understand things. In the ring you can't stop, you can't pass the ball to your teammate when you're tired because in the ring they hit, you can't hide. And pride will never let you abandon a match, ever.

If you are boxing at a certain level, a series of consequences occur that reflect a lot on your personal and everyday life. Everything is taken to an extreme: your rapport with your body, with the strain, with pain and with other people.

That's right. It's difficult, it conditions you a lot. I've also had some problems in the gym, even though when I go, I get changed, I work out, sweat, say good by and leave. I talk with everyone; I try to give advice to anyone who needs it. In the gym I don't want problems because I have to work. I don't have my own gym, I'm always a guest, so it often happens that when you start to do more, people talk, envy starts up and they think "what's this guy doing here in our gym?" At "Doria" I'm happier, they've accepted me. But these are some of the problems. There's collaboration as long as interests aren't involved, as long as you're not ball breaking. In a boxing gym you suffer, sweat and work and that's all. In the fitness gyms you go to socialize. In a boxing gym you don't go to talk with this guy or that guy, you go knowing you have to do your job, try and improve and make corrections. You have to have the will to work alone and look after yourself. You should have a trainer following you; I have one only during training retreat, not during the year. I'm pretty self-sufficient, when I'm working out I'm meticulous, I program myself. I have my doctor, my dietitian and my psychologist.

Is this because structures are lacking or is it an aspect of this sport?

Seeing that it's an individual sport you have to know how you feel, if you're okay or not. You have to know your body, how it reacts. You have to follow what your body tells you; you know when to stop working out a bit and when to push. You have to look after yourself, because even a trainer can't understand how you feel inside. He can see if you take a punch badly, he can see if you're tired, but you have to take care of yourself.

It's a twenty-four hour a day job.

In the end yes, I know that I have to rest a certain number of hours, I know that I have to go to bed at a precise time, be careful of what I eat and drink, my digestion. I know I have to be careful about a whole series of things, about every aspect of my day.

Luca Messi

Interview at the “Bergamo Boxe” club, Bergamo, June 10, 2002

I am the Italian champion and the Intercontinental welterweight champion. I won the Italian title two and a half months ago on March 8th, a beautiful match here in Bergamo against Antonio Lauri from Varese. What can I say? I’ve been boxing for ten years. I’ve been a professional for about four and a half years and I began this activity when I was seventeen. From the beginning, I’ve been working out in this gym, it’s my second family by now, I spend the best part of my day here. I began boxing almost as a hobby. I wanted to do something a bit different from everyone else. I’ve always been someone who wants to distinguish himself in whatever he does. I’ve always done unusual things because I like to be different. Later however, I saw how much my character and physical traits as well as my spiritual characteristics of sacrifice and suffering were suited to this sport. The necessary qualities were there and I became convinced that I wanted to be a boxer. I began to fight, I won my first successes and from there I reached the Italian championship. Before long, I’ll do the semi-finals for the European championship. I’m happy to have chosen this route, it gives me a great deal, more than from an economic point of view, it gives me a lot on a human level.

Did you start straight away with boxing or did you try other combat sports first?

No, I began with boxing straight away. Before that I’d played football and I did motocross... I did a little of everything but the first thing that I did seriously was boxing. The rest I did for fun.

I’m asking you because I’ve seen that many boxers in recent years begin with other combat sports like kick boxing, and only later come to boxing.

I started with boxing as a combat sport, thank God, otherwise I might have wasted years with a sport that was nice but one that doesn’t get you anywhere, at least that goes for Italy where several sports like kick boxing are not yet at the level of boxing. With boxing you can earn money and make a position for yourself in the official sports world. We shouldn’t forget that boxing, as opposed to other combat sports, is an Olympic sport. Being in the national team gives you the possibility to travel all over the world, and the media pays attention to you, which isn’t true of other sports. Therefore boxing definitely can do something for you.

Is it difficult to have a good exchange with the outside world and feedback from the media about what you do?

I am lucky because I live in Bergamo, which is pretty different from the rest of Italy. Perhaps I behave differently from many other boxers. I have always received a lot of at-

tention here from the local media, television and papers and I’m well known on a political level. I am popular here, and this brings me certain advantages, which is obviously nice for me. Certainly on a national or international level boxers aren’t considered anything. Recently there was the match with Tyson, only big events make waves in the media, whereas Italian or European champions aren’t even noticed. This is the case in Italy. If we leave Italy and go to France, England or Germany, boxing is still at an excellent level, not to mention in America. Unfortunately in Italy we’re still obscured in the shadows. Here football gets all the attention, and cycling, with the Giro d’Italia, although even that disappears for the rest of the year. Unfortunately football is overshadowing us and in recent years the media hasn’t done anything but talk badly about boxing. I still don’t understand the reason because in terms of danger, there are many sports where the death rate is much higher than boxing. According to statistics, boxing is in tenth place regarding sports mortality. Car racing is first, then mountain climbing, scuba diving and parachuting... It’s just that in these sports when something happens they say it’s an accident, but when something happens in boxing, it’s a drama. Then they talk about abolishing this sport, they say it’s violent. Why isn’t a sport where you kill yourself going 300 kilometres an hour or a rally that runs over twenty people who are calmly watching the spectacle considered violent? When I go into the ring, I know the rules. I know the risks I run; I don’t know why they have to be so ruthless.

The last time we saw each other we touched on the relationship between religion and boxing. We talked about suffering and sacrifice for example, especially in the Catholic faith. Can you talk some more about this?

I consider myself a Christian failure. I’m one of those who believe in God but don’t practice, which in reality is absurd. My brother is a priest and when I said that I’m a non-practicing Christian he asked me if I had a girlfriend. I said: “yes”. He asked if I “practiced” with my girlfriend. Practice... we all understand what that is. I said “sure”. “Then how can you love a person and not practice her?” he said. You see that it’s absurd; you can’t say you believe in God and not practice your faith. I must say that I do feel close to God when I have a match and during the preparation period. I pray on the day of the match and I say thanks for winning or for not getting hurt after the match. When you put yourself on the line, when you try to do anything important that could risk your career or something more than your career, you seek something that gives you the strength that you can’t find elsewhere, if not in yourself then in God. You hope that God will give you the strength, otherwise, alone, you wouldn’t know where to look. Of course you also take refuge in something, in my sports bag I always have a picture of Christ with a prayer that I read in church, when lighting a candle, before a match. I don’t pray to win. First I pray that I don’t get hurt, then I pray to win and I pray that my opponent doesn’t get hurt. I think that any boxer going into the ring knows he is going to do something important. It’s almost a mission, because, whatever happens, you put

yourself to the test. You put yourself to the test in a way that you can understand only if you've actually done it. You test yourself; you suffer for your belief, which almost becomes an ideology: a belief in yourself. It's a bit like the Christians who faced suffering to defend their belief. When we go into the ring, it may seem a bit excessive, but we go for our belief, which in that moment is ourselves. You face any risk, any suffering, to show what you're worth. It's important to always stay humble; you are there stripped of everything, wearing only shorts with a bare chest; you cannot hide. There you are, in front of everyone and everything, with this sense of risk. There can't be any subterfuge. There isn't a hiding place where you can recover from a difficult moment: there is you, your opponent and that's it, unless maybe your God helps you.

What is the value of victory for you?

When you fight, victory is the best thing; it is what you are looking for. It is the climax of so much training, so much suffering and sacrifice. It is not the victory itself that brings satisfaction but the fact that when you win, you know you can aim towards another goal. It's the continuing search for victory that's important, not the victory itself. When you win a match, maybe a title, you leave the ring and you've barely finished thinking of that victory and you already have another objective in mind. Perhaps this is the nicest thing that sport can give you: you live in a totally different way from everyone else. When you live an athlete's life, you savour life in a different way because every morning when you get up you know there is a goal to meet and the following day there is another and so on. I've had jobs: in a factory; I worked in a bar; I'm qualified as a physiotherapist and have worked in the hospital. In this situation you go to work and in the evening you come home, you have a beer with friends and the story's over. Instead, it's fantastic when you live for a goal; it allows you to live life fully. Boxing is an ongoing process, you always have stimulus and you always receive stimulus. Boredom and depression don't exist because you know that every day when you get up you have to work towards your goal. Of course it's not easy to always be going after something; it's tiring, a continuous physical and mental suffering. You don't live quietly but you live life to the full.

One of the points that interest me in this boxing project is the affinity between the artistic approach and the attitudes of the boxers I have met. For example, this constant attempt to improve, to have new goals in your mind, finding new limits, reaching them and finding new ones again. It seems a kind of gambling with more than one set of rules.

Of course, you're always looking for something. I think that people who are able to do something important in life are people who are always searching. You always need a bit of madness to arrive at something great and surely anyone doing a sport like mine is a bit crazy. I think the same thing happens in art, like you said, or in scientific research: a

continuous search for something, before long, leads you to do something great, if not for others, at least for yourself.

What role does the gym play in this process?

The gym is the means to arrive at your goal. When I go to the gym I forget everything else: anger, problems; joy, they are left behind. When I go to the gym I'm another person. I change, put on my training clothes, and in that moment I'm a boxer and I should only think about boxing. The gym is like the artists' canvas, it is the right place for you to be and you're totally into it, even if outside there's a war going on. The gym is also a place to meet friends when a match isn't coming up. Also, in Bergamo I run the gym with Omar Gentile, so I really spend the whole day here. This is my full time job.

Can you make a living from boxing and what you do at the gym?

Yes, sort of. Maybe I should learn to save a bit more... but as I said, living in Bergamo, a city that loves me, and with Omar's help, I manage to organize my own matches. I decide my fee. I decide my own career. I can do this because I can find sponsors who support me because they know me. I've always behaved well and so people lend me a hand.

Perhaps there is more direct contact with the sponsors in Bergamo compared to a bigger city?

Yes, that's right. Plus Bergamo is a wealthy city; they can handle it.

What is the relationship between boxing and violence?

I don't think there is one. I realize that it isn't easy to understand, because if you don't know about boxing you see it labelled as a violent sport. I can't say it isn't a tough sport, it's very tough. As in other sports, there's physical contact, but in comparison to other sports, boxing is still primitive and you see aggression in the full. I think the fouls in football are more violent; you risk breaking your opponent's ankle by going beyond the rules of the sport. That's real violence. The same is true for people cycling who push and knock each other to the ground. Boxing has its' rules, it started with humankind and if it still exists now that means it isn't so violent. Everyone says that boxing is violent but when it's on television they watch it. That means either humankind is crazy and loves violence or proves that boxing is just a nice sport to watch. I read something written by Mickey Rourke, who was a professional boxer by the way, even if he didn't achieve great results. It's a phrase that I find describes boxing very well: "In boxing you live man's primordial instinct, the same instinct that society seeks to repress and destroy. Boxing allows me to express myself fully, my rage, and my hate. These sentiments come from desires which are frustrated by an empty society. I have never been able to free myself of that fury nor will I ever free myself, I can only live with it". I think that's a

beautiful phrase, which explains why I box. By challenging myself, by suffering, boxing has allowed me to stand out in this society; it has enabled me to do something out of the ordinary. Aggression is your personal thing, it isn't directed at your opponent, it's your thing that you want to take control of and use. I think there's violence everywhere but we don't talk about it. There is psychological violence and the violence of your boss who ruins your life. In some places where I've worked, I could see that they were destroying you mentally and physically. If you're weak they'll take your soul away, they'll treat you like a slave, sure of the fear you have of your superior. No one is ever superior to you, maybe different, but not superior.

How has boxing changed you?

Personally, boxing made me understand the importance of sacrifice; what it means to suffer; to get somewhere: this is something today's youth don't understand. I'm young too but at seventeen it isn't easy not to go dancing with friends and not to have a beer because you're preparing for a match. You have to give up a lot if you really want to do a sport well. Then you understand the value of sacrifice and you understand how great it is to sacrifice yourself to reach a goal. Victory repays all the sacrifices and gives you the drive to face all that effort again. Thanks to boxing I have got to know people in different environments: politicians, businessmen, doctors and television people. At twenty-seven I have done things that many people only dream about.

You spoke of what victory does for you. What about defeat?

Up until now, thank heavens, it has given me the stimulus to demonstrate that I'm still worth something; it has given me the anger to do things again, it hasn't ever discouraged me. Certainly after lots of sacrifice, it's hard to lose, but then you can't wait for them to offer another opportunity to show what you're worth. I think that every loss should be taken as a stimulus. Every day in life has losses, it's important that they don't get you down.

What can boxing give to a person?

Boxing has given me self-confidence; it led me to believe in my potential and my own capacity. Lots of people could benefit from this sport: they could learn more about what sacrifice is; respect for others and oneself; body culture; the importance of good health; being careful with smoking and alcohol; knowing yourself fully and knowing your limits. Many people who come to the gym are maybe a little shy and then bit by bit they become more sure of themselves, have more faith. When you're sure of yourself you can talk with people and look them in the eye, you're not afraid or uncomfortable with others. I don't understand people who speak to you without looking you in the eye. If you're sure of yourself and know what you're worth, even in front of a doctor or lawyer... They are people, that's all. At times I ask myself, if I had a son would I want him

to do boxing? In moments when you suffer a lot or when you envy other athletes who work much less and have much more glory, and not only economic, then I say no. But then, I remember that this sport has completely changed my life, it has given me opportunities that another wouldn't have brought me. If I had continued working in the factory or as a physiotherapist, I wouldn't have had the excitement that this sport has given me, and there has been a lot of excitement. When, as an amateur, I won my first regional championship, I wept for joy. These are emotions that you only feel when you do something different. Perhaps with art you experience certain emotions, you live your life in a different way than others.

Yes, for sure. However, I think one of the differences in comparison with boxing lies in the fact that in art the line between winning and losing doesn't exist. For the same piece of work you can get very different reactions, there's no clear demarcation. A judgement exists but it's always subjective. The satisfaction is found in other things that are less clear and not in a final "victory".

Perhaps in what you do you have to have even more conviction than I do, where if you win and have knocked out your opponent, there's nothing more to say. There are always disputes, but at the end of the day, you've won, you won the title. In what you do you're always a bit... how can I say, you really have to believe in what you do. You've done a piece of work, you have to be convinced of yourself and you have to be convinced that for you it's an opera. That's enough. It's yours; it comes from your heart; it's your effort; you've created it and what the others say doesn't count. Even if in reality it counts because if you want money in the bank you have to find someone who says to you "this is beautiful, I'll pay whatever you want". You also know that you can't live from satisfaction alone.

Are these aspects of boxing found in other sports or do you think it is the main characteristic of this discipline?

Well, all sports are a continuous search for goals. I think the satisfaction is greater in boxing because there is more suffering. I think the more you suffer for something the more joy you experience when you attain it. The satisfaction is proportional to the suffering.

Describe your training, a typical day.

When I'm preparing for a match I begin the morning with running, I run for an hour then I do a bit of gymnastics and a bit of stretching. After work out, I drink fresh juice and that lasts me until noon. For lunch I have a light meal: white rice, pasta or salad. Then I rest and at five I work out in the gym. Here, where my coach supervises me, I work with the punch bags; in the ring I do a little sparring; I do some skipping and weights... I do a little bit of everything. By the evening I'm so tired that at nine, nine

thirty I'm in bed. When I'm in preparation I almost never go out in the evening. That's why afterwards I enjoy these things twice as much. When I've finished a match and I've won, I know that restaurants, discos and beer are waiting for me... You enjoy these things twice as much as everyone else. For me, a meal with friends is something wonderful, because I have deprived myself for so long. You know what it means to deprive yourself of certain small pleasures. You reach the point where you dream of water at night, you're thirsty but when you have to make the weight, you have to even be careful of what you drink. You learn to savour all the things of life.

During your workout in the gym I noticed that you are constantly being supervised by your coach.

Yes, Egidio Bugada, he's been working with me with a devoted passion, supervising me for ten years now. He is my boxing mentor. As far as boxing is concerned, I have him to thank. He made me who I am; he shaped me.

When you're not preparing for a match, what do you do?

I work out in the gym, a bit more relaxed. I do one workout a day, in the gym and that's all. I don't go running in the morning because at night I go to bed late. I keep in shape. Then fifty days before a match I get myself going. When I'm not preparing for a match, I do all the things I don't normally do: I drink wine, go to restaurants and I love to eat. I love to eat and travel, those are my two favourite things, apart from women, obviously; they are a vice.

How many matches do you do in a year?

As a professional, in four and a half years, I've done twenty-two matches. In the beginning you do a lot and then bit by bit, as you move up a level, the matches get tougher and more difficult. By necessity, then the preparation is longer so the matches are fewer.

Is there anything you would like to add, any other points you want to cover?

No, nothing. I would like to come back to the fact that if I had a son I would gladly have him do this sport, hoping that he would live it as I have, in the best way. I know I'm lucky because few are able to live from boxing the way I do. Many of my colleagues have to work: maybe they work as builders all day, in the evening they have to go to the gym and they have managers who give them a miserable fee. Most boxers are really treated badly.

I think it's nice that you can manage your own matches, that you organize yourself.

Sure, I'm not hooked up with anyone. I have a contract with my manager, but I can say yes or no whenever I want.

Barbara Plazzoli

Interview at the "Bergamo Boxe" Club, Bergamo, June 12, 2002

I began to do kick boxing in '94. I don't know if you are aware of the various specialties: light, full, semi... I began with light contact which is continuous light contact. It is light on the principal that knock out isn't permitted. After three, four years of activity I moved to the nationals in light contact and now I'm in full contact nationals where knock out is allowed. In terms of titles I won the world light championship in '99 and the '01 full in Belgrade, then a few world cups and Italian titles.

Now you've moved on to boxing, doing the two sports simultaneously. Why did you decide to make this move?

Now that they have opened the women's sector in boxing things are interesting: you get to fight a bit more than kick boxing where at a professional level you fight three, four times a year. I seemed to see that at least for women, in boxing there were a lot more fights. There's a lot of activity so right now I want to just try and see how it goes.

How is it that you became interested in boxing, are there specific characteristics that attracted you?

I like kick boxing and I like boxing, that's all.

Do you note any differences between the two disciplines, not only in terms of sports but also the atmosphere, differences in the sort of people practicing the two sports?

One could say that the training for boxing seems more serious, structured and the environment is more rigid. According to my experience, in kick boxing you go to the gym almost for pleasure notwithstanding the effort and sacrifice. In the kick boxing gym, perhaps because I have my group of friends, the atmosphere seems more relaxed even though there is always the element of sacrifice. In addition there are interests behind boxing, for example there is a single federation, the Italian Boxing Federation, whereas in kick boxing there are several federations which makes the situation a bit chaotic.

Thus the boxing organization is simpler, clearer and therefore it is clearer what you're doing and what level you've reached.

Yes, exactly.

Has the fact that you're a woman caused difficulties in your sport's activity or in other areas?

No, nothing in particular. There is always a little scepticism, maybe they see a cut on

your face and they ask how you got it. You say that you got it fighting and sometimes there is a sort of hilarious reaction, but it's a manageable hilarity. Sooner or later this situation will change too. In this boxing gym I have never had problems even though it is new for me and at the moment there are very few women enrolled. As far as kick boxing is concerned, my gym companions and I are together for many years, we grew up together and we are a very close group of friends.

Women's kick boxing is far more widespread and has taken root more than women's boxing.

Yes, much more. For ten years there have been women in the kick boxing ring whereas in boxing this is very recent, perhaps not even a year. Certainly, even before, there were women working out but they had to enroll abroad because in Italy they weren't even recognized.

So it's only been a year since the federation officially recognized women's boxing?

Yes, the athletes were enrolled abroad and obviously had to fight abroad too. As a result, today all the Italian Women's Nationals in the boxing federation are made up of women who started with kick boxing. Certainly boxing is something else entirely, perceiving several punches you work on small imperfections but at least you already have experience in the ring.

What stand does the federation take concerning women's boxing? Are they promoting it?

Today this sport is highly considered, perhaps because we won the world amateurs with Galassi. They set up a lot of fights for women and it seems to me that boxing has picked up a bit due to this. At the moment it seems they grant a fair amount of importance to it.

During your activity have you tried working out in many gyms? What do you think about the atmosphere in the gym?

I have tried a few gyms, not a whole lot but always around Bergamo. The atmosphere is good, I like it a lot. I like the group that forms, working out together, the sacrifice and the happiness when you win match or not when you win lose. I like the environment of the gym a lot, particularly in the case of kick boxing, where, as I said, we've been working out for years and we're really friends. In the end what matters is that you suffer and grow together. Then you get together outside of the gym and go for a drink.

Do you work out regularly every day?

No, not always, maybe one day yes, one day no. I'm probably a defeatist...

Can you tell me about the value you place in victory? After so much effort what does it mean to win?

Winning means you've reached your personal goal. It is the satisfaction of having expressed all you've learned and sweat for. My victory is also for all the people around me, the people who have helped me both when I'm training and when I'm not. There are matches you lose but you have the satisfaction all the same. Sometimes I've fought well; I've managed to do all that I could to have a good fight and then you lose. But it's okay; you are still satisfied even if you didn't have a real, true victory. You're satisfied for what you did and this is a victory in and of itself, aside from winning or losing the match. I think that what counts is being able to practice what you've learned, to succeed in doing something where you've given your all, what you sweat for.

So in some situations victory and defeat are relative, the importance is to express your capability to the fullest.

Yes, for me victory and defeat are really relative. Of course if you lose an Italian championship you're sorry but if the match went well you are still satisfied. If your opponent was better and you lose, it's okay; later there will be other opportunities to win. It is important that you always give it everything you've got.

How do you stand with respect to the media? What do you think about the way they go after boxing, often judging it without any real understanding?

This is something that I don't like and that I've thought about many times. Boxing is always seen as a violent sport and that's it. The reason they go after us; I don't know. It's always connected to the conviction that boxing is just throwing punches and nothing more, when in fact this is not so because there is style and technique with many factors coming into play. I don't know, perhaps Italians are a bit bigoted, they can't swallow it. I have no idea why.

Certainly the vision one generally has of boxing is very superficial. When you have a minimal understanding from within, going to a gym and looking beyond appearances, you find situations and people that are extremely interesting and intense. Can you tell me about the satisfactions and difficulties you've met up with during your career?

One of the initial difficulties was going into the ring, having people watch while you fight. This difficulty was due to my timidity, but otherwise I haven't had other problems. All the rest is satisfaction and that's it. As far as boxing is concerned, I can see improvement in a short span of time: improvement in velocity, in my eye, in many things and this gives me a great deal of satisfaction. I've achieved many goals; the greatest of all was winning the world full contact championship.

How many people follow your activity and what role do they have?

As far as boxing is concerned, here at the “Bergamo Boxe” gym there is Coach Egidio Bugado. Every once and a while his son coaches me. For kick boxing, there’s my boyfriend who is a teacher at the gym I go to. We have a manager in Livorno who gets us matches and comes to an agreement for the purse.

What is the rapport between boxing, kick boxing and violence?

None. It’s true that you take punches but I don’t find anything violent, there is no violence. I hope I don’t change my mind in the future.

What characteristics does boxing have with respect to other sports?

I like it because it is sort of a way of venting, cancelling the stress of the day. Sometimes I get to the gym and I’m tired but then the mere athletic gesture of hitting the bag releases the tension. I also like it on a technical level; I like the physical elasticity that you must have in your arms and legs. One finds this a bit more in kick boxing where you do more stretching because you have to lengthen your leg muscles.

How has this sport changed you?

I am more sure of myself, less shy and maybe now I can get along better with people. I have found the kind of confidence that allows me to be with people. I’ve become less aggressive, because my shyness made me aggressive. Now I find I’m more tranquil, more at peace.

During months of training for boxing do you have your own personal idea of this sport, your point of view?

For me it is made up of a lot of small challenges that I create for myself, in the sense that I’m here and I work out to achieve my own personal, interior goal.