

21st-Century Gender Games

Kate Maclean and David X Green

Chess-boxing involves playing four minutes of chess followed by a round of boxing, until there is either a win by checkmate or knockout. It unites two notoriously male-dominated games: boxing, which, in 2012, was the last Olympic sport to admit women, and chess, which, despite being inclusive in terms of class, ethnicity, nationality and age, is remarkably exclusive of women and girls. Both sports exemplify the masculine-coded traits of rational calculation, rivalry, and belligerence, but opposing ideals of masculinity are also at play; a juxtaposition of the so-called noble art of boxing, associated with physical prowess, and a board game that defines the high school geek.

Chess-boxing's founder, performance artist Iepe Rubingh, did indeed aim to create a sport that would establish the "ultimate man," who triumphs in both brains and brawn. But, as chess-boxing developed internationally, its "London scene" took quite a different approach. When I expressed my surprise at being invited—before mentioning my interest in gender—to their International Women's Day training session, the organizer looked genuinely mortified at the implied hyper-masculinity of his sport: "Oh god. That stuff's just a total embarrassment, really."

The London matches certainly disturb gendered assumptions. The arbiter is a former England women's chess champion with a black belt in kung-fu. The ring girls have been replaced by a large, hairy, male "Berserker" (a Viking character represented in medieval chess sets). A key characteristic of London chess-boxing events is the use of parody, as players enter the ring as characters maximizing the hybrid sport's comedic value. The personas include *Dan the Taxman*, who wears boxing shorts with a shirt and tie and uses the motto "Two things in life are certain—death and taxes—he brings both," and *Toto the Robot*, who dances out to "It's Raining Men" by The Weather Girls in a lycra morphsuit.

There is a danger that parody can reinforce the gendered status quo precisely because it relies on the established order for its humor. But at the same time, it can show up gendered norms which are so naturalized as to be invisible. Chess-boxing, as it goes beyond a hybrid to consolidate into its own sport with, according to all involved, "its tongue firmly in its cheek," is creating some interesting gender games.

The perspicuous plays on gender in the women's matches set up a space in which the strictures of femininity can be subverted. The December 2022 contest involved European chess-boxing champion Juliana "Kick Ass Baroness" Baron entering the ring in a crinoline whilst singing an aria. Her opponent, Marie "Killer Queen" Obegi, came in to the Freddy Mercury number of the

same name. One woman chess-boxer explained how she felt when she first started: “When I first went into the ring... there was this big mirror and I thought, ‘Yeah, I like this... oh my god, I’m strong.’” She continued, “I found the boxing gyms less threatening and generally more welcoming than chess clubs to be honest,” confirming what many feel about Islington Boxing Club where the training is based. Another compared the congenial atmosphere of chess-boxing with the gendered pressure of chess matches she remembered playing as a girl: “losing to a girl was very bad—it was a very macho thing... losing to a girl, can’t be doing that. Sulking, tantrums, crying—and some of the parents were terrifying.”

Boxing provides a space where the visceral has permission, and chess-boxing has extended the invitation beyond boxing’s traditional audience. A former women’s chess-boxing champion recalled taking some of her university students along to one of her first fights, and noticing how despite being intimidated initially by the unfamiliar atmosphere, they soon found it cathartic: “I had one student—and she’s the sweetest girl... she would never swear or anything—but as soon as she realized people around her were cheering on my opponent, she started swearing and shouting with the rest of them.”

Chess-boxers are keen to specify the distinctiveness of the sport as it moves beyond a hybrid, and they emphasize that the defining skill is in switching from the high physical exertion of boxing to the cerebral concentration of chess. “As I’ve gone on training, I’ve realized just how strategic boxing is... you need to control the center in both, and in boxing, just like chess, moving first is an advantage.” They also recognize the emotion in both: “Your heart is racing before a boxing match, but at really crucial points in chess that happens too.”

All that and it’s inescapably fun. The crowd is chanting “chess chess chess” as hilariously ironic grand masters provide commentary on the moves to heighten the drama, and the joy and comradery of the training sessions translates into the ring, despite the pressures of the match. By parodying and disrupting multiple gendered binaries, chess-boxing provides a space where creative and challenging identities can emerge.

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