



Women also show their mettle in the ring – the youngest was an 18-year-old matric learner. Everyone wears proper boxing attire.



Two boxers tackle each other amid great applause from the crowd. The youngest man to fight on the night was 21.

Boxing Association, he says proudly. And the exercise programme is tough. "Boxing is the best exercise you can get. It's simple but difficult to sustain."

They box until blood flows – but the injuries are superficial. Apart from an ankle injury no one has been seriously hurt, says club manager Olivia Jackson (30), an enthusiastic boxer.

"If people aren't strong enough to defend themselves they're not allowed in the ring."

The club hosts four Fight Nights a year and contestants train for about three months for each fight, Steve says.

There are no titles or money up for grabs. "You just get a big hug and we all have a drink at the bar. We also take photos of all the contestants which they can keep as souvenirs. We're all winners."

Tonight is Fight Night and it's not long before the place is packed. The mood is jovial: there's a DJ and tall young women in skinny jeans and stilettos wander around.

As the lights dim the ring is illuminated. There's an ear-splitting cheer and applause from the crowd. Steve reminds everyone there is to be no heckling.

"Every fight has three two-minute rounds with a minute's pause in between," announces the MC, a handsome dark-haired man in spiffy clothes.

Is the pause to check everyone still has all their teeth? I wonder.

There are eight fights tonight. Guillaume "Thor" Retief is one of the 16 boxers. Among the others are Matt "The Bruiser" Banner, Anne-Sophie "The Bringer of Pain" Leens, Nicholas "The Killer Bee" Potchecary and Donna "Shaya" Blagus.

Matt (21) is a psychology student, Anne-Sophie (34) a graphic designer, Nicholas (22) a marketing assistant and Donna (18) a matric learner.

Not that you can tell what they do outside the ring – they all look terrifying in their face masks, boxing gloves and battle gear.

Guillaume and Nicholas are first up. Speakers blare metal band Metallica's version of Whiskey in the Jar and suddenly I'm afraid – very afraid.

The guys engage each other and the crowd goes wild. "Come on, Nic!" someone shouts. "Yeaahhh, that's it!" someone else supports Guillaume.

The two minutes feel like two years. The men go at each other with a vengeance.

Finally the minute break comes around and everyone can breathe again. A blonde in a barely-there black dress holds up a sign indicating the end of round one.

The boxers look battered and the referee calls a halt. There's no

winner: he holds up both their hands before the fighters hug like old friends.

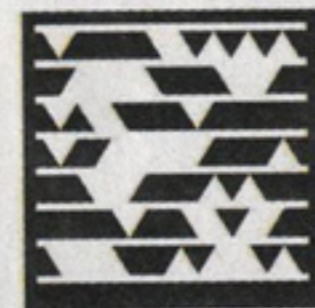
It's the girls' turn: Anne-Sophie against Donna. They both have bloody noses in an instant. I close my eyes but they survive all three rounds and once again there's a friendly embrace.

Afterwards a tired but happy Anne-Sophie says, "When my nose started bleeding all I was thinking was I hope they don't stop the fight because of it."

Later I bump into Guillaume where he's relaxing with a beer

among his friends. No, he didn't get hurt; he just got rid of his frustration and stress.

And that's the reason they're all here. "It's to find out what you're made of," he says. "Our trainer always says this is boxing, not ballet." □



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BOXING TIPS

- Keep your fists up next to your face and your arms tight against your ribs at all times.
- Don't turn your face away or close your eyes.
- Don't lose your temper.
- You're defending yourself, not hitting to hurt.
- One leg must always be in front of the other to make you more agile.
- Keep your feet moving forward or backward.
- Use the power of your whole body when you land a punch.



YOU's Haidee Muller got into the spirit of things.