Enzo Calzaghe: A Fighting Life


Reviewed by Matt Emmett, Settle, North Yorkshire, United Kingdom.

Despite never lacing up the gloves in the ring, Enzo Calzaghe is the most decorated trainer-coach in the history of British boxing. He successfully guided his son, Joe Calzaghe, through a 16 year undefeated professional boxing career (46 – 0), holding world championships in 2 separate weight divisions (Super middleweight and Light heavyweight). Joe is the longest reigning Super middleweight champion in history (1997 to 2009), with victories over boxing legends including, Chris Eubank, Bernard Hopkins and Roy Jones Jr. Enzo also lead stablemate fighters, Gavin Rees and Enzo Maccarinelli to world titles in their respective weight divisions all from his modest training base, the Newbridge Boxing Club in Newbridge, South Wales. A Fighting Life shares Enzo’s extraordinary life story; his unconventional rise to coaching success and how he nurtured his son into a boxing legend. The purpose of this review is to offer insight into Enzo’s life and career, presenting key lessons learned and points of reflection for coaches.

An Unusual Path to Coaching

Enzo Calzaghe was born January 1, 1949 in Sardinia, Italy. He was raised by working class parents and spent his childhood living in Italy and England. Enzo was bullied at school and as a result only completed seven years of formal education. He started full time work at the age of 13 and drifted through a series of manual jobs. At 15 Enzo discovered music and joined his uncle’s band, ‘The Reindeers’. He dreamed of becoming a rock star and travelling the world. In his teenage years Enzo became involved with drugs and alcohol, and spent most of his nights ‘gigging’ whilst drunk and high.

At 18 Enzo decided to leave Sardinia to pursue his dream, arriving in Rome with nothing but his guitar and the clothes on his back. After spending some time ‘busking’ Enzo travelled across Europe and settled in Amsterdam. After 6 months he was still homeless, severely malnourished, and penniless but refused to return home a failure. Enzo’s next step took him back to England, he persuaded the captain of a tomato boat in the port of Rotterdam into allowing him to sail to London! Arriving in London Enzo then walked 108 miles to a relative’s home in Bournemouth. Enzo gets married and has three children. He works as a bus conductor during the day and also holds down a second job working nights in a cider factory to support his young family. At the age of 9 his son Joe is bullied at school and in an attempt to defend himself is desperate to take up boxing. Enzo starts teaching his son to box by rolling up carpet and using it as punching bag. Enzo then meets Paul, the owner of a local boxing gym. Paul invites Enzo and Joe to the gym, and it is here where the Calzaghe’s journey to boxing success really begins.

Lesson #1: Enthusiasm for Learning

Upon entering Newbridge Boxing Gym for the first time, Enzo recalls the experience,

There was something I couldn’t quiet put my finger on but I felt very comfortable watching the guys doing the pad work, skipping, and the heavy bag…. within a couple of weeks Paul started showing me the basics and I became an assistant. It was all new to me and I was genuinely fascinated. I tried to be in the boxing gym as much as I could, learning a new craft. Paul never tried to curb my instincts and never got territorial about things. (p. 97)

Through my own coaching experiences as a non-playing tennis coach (at a number of levels; club, collegiate and now performance) both in the United Kingdom and the United States I have repeatedly encountered a guarded perception that playing experience is a prerequisite of high performance coaching. Subsequently, I believe this prevailing mind-set is restricting coaching opportunities to a select group (former professional athletes). Also my experience as a coaching scientist has strengthened my belief that playing and coaching are two entirely different skills. With this in mind I believe stakeholders within the coaching profession (employers,
team managers, athletic directors, head coaches, coach educators etc.) should never stifle a person’s desire to coach, especially those who have never played the sport they aspire to teach. An enthusiasm for learning (and not the ability to play the sport) is the quality we should be championing in the next generation of coaches.

**Lesson #2: Simplicity**

For the first 20 years of Joe’s boxing career, Enzo was Joe’s main sparring partner, Enzo explains,

> I had never boxed, it sounds ridiculous but it just worked: I would try and make difficult angles for Joe to aim at and would just ‘paw’ at him sometimes to keep him on is toes. That worked for us for nearly a quarter of a century. (p. 96)

Coaches should always keep in mind that each athlete is unique, possessing different talents and needs. Coaches should be prepared to adapt their skills to best serve the needs of the individual. Coaches should be open to working on a ‘trial and error’ basis until they establish what works best for each athlete. If it works then stick with it and don’t be afraid to keep it simple.

**Lesson #3: Know Your Athletes**

As Joe became more assured in the ring, Enzo was also growing in confidence as a coach.

> I became a tough taskmaster on Joe during his teenage years because this was his dream and I pushed him as hard as I could toward it. I’d make him run in the snow or do an extra 50 push ups, even when he would say that he didn’t want to. At that time ‘you’ll never be a champion unless you…’ was one of my favourite catchphrases. (p. 101)

Enzo understood Joe’s internal desire (to become a world champion) and learned that referencing this was the most effective way to motivate him in the moment (during a tough exercise) and on a day to day basis. Regardless of the sport coaches need to understand what intrinsically motivates their athletes. The most effective way to find out is to spend time with your athletes (outside of the practice and completion settings). Get to know them as people first, and use their insights to tailor your motivational strategies.

**Lesson #4: Teach Mental Toughness**

In 1992 Joe and Enzo were working toward qualification for the Barcelona Olympic Games. Following a hand injury and a dispute with the Welsh Boxing Board Joe was not shortlisted for the Olympic team. Rather than viewing this as a setback Joe chose to use it as a source of motivation.

Joe turned the whole thing into a positive. It’s his belief that if he’d won a medal at Barcelona and come back a superstar he might have lost his hunger. It fuelled the fire, made him even more determined to prove to everyone he was going all the way to the top. (p. 109)

Quality coaches understand their responsibilities are far wider than just teaching skills and strategies. They actively take on multiple roles in the lives of their athletes, none more important than that of a mentor. Coaches should teach their athletes that adversity is an unavoidable and necessary part of life. Helping them understand the importance of personal choice (it is how you choose to view the situation and respond that matters, and not the adversity itself) is a valuable lesson for any athlete. Teaching and instilling characteristics of a mentally tough performer will improve the experiences of your athletes on and off the field of play.

**Lesson #5: Reflection**

Joe’s opportunity to fight for the World Boxing Organization (WBO) Super Middleweight Championship came on October 11, 1997 against Chris Eubank. Enzo explains how events leading up to the fight influenced the way he prepared for future bouts.

> As a trainer I’ve never overly concerned myself with watching film of the opponent. The reason I stopped doing that was after the Eubank experience. When I knew it was him I got a pile of video tapes and watched him religiously. I drove myself mad overanalysing, it caused me to panic and put doubt in my mind. (p. 127)

Furthermore, Enzo explains how fight night turned out to be a steep learning curve:

> I got everything wrong in terms of preparation. We arrived too early and worked too much on the pads. Joe was expending far too much energy. I was a bundle of nerves and could tell I was really annoying Joe, I should have left him on his own. (p. 127)

In the coaching profession there is no better teacher than experience; learning by doing. Coaches are advised to formulate strategies to enhance the quality of their reflection. Taking the time to do so provides the opportunity for a deeper understanding of the coaching process and when carried out (critically and systematically) can improve future coaching action.

**Lesson #6: Build Trust**

Joe was experiencing difficulty with injuries throughout 1998 and 1999. It affected his confidence, performances and attitude. Sensing a decline Joe’s promoter suggested that it might be time to consider a change in coach.