

Conditions of Spanish amateur boxing in the 1980s: A change of perspective

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ABSTRACT

This research exposes the diverse sporting, social, economic, and political circumstances that amateur boxing experienced during the 1980s and early 1990s in Spain. This qualitative research is framed in the History of the Present Time and used the testimony of six oral sources, three of them Olympic boxers contemporary to the period under study. The results show that boxing began to be understood as a violent practice by some sectors of the Spanish population and its practice was banned in some parts of Spain. Its dissemination in the press and public television diminished notably and a gap was opened between professional boxing and amateur boxing in the popular ideology, understanding both with the differences that identified them, since the former began to be vilified, which negatively affected amateur boxing. These circumstances began to change in the 1990s, as boxing began to be used as a form of self-defence and was included in sports complexes for purposes other than competition. We can conclude that, despite the fact that in the 1980s the Spanish sport experienced a definitive boost, the circumstances described above were especially detrimental to amateur boxing in terms of the recruitment of practitioners and with respect to the economic support necessary for technicians and gyms in which they developed their pugilistic practice, which continued to be constituted as exclusive boxing halls located in marginal neighbourhoods.

Keywords: Olympism; Contact sports; History of sport; Spanish athletes.

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INTRODUCTION

Spanish amateur boxing underwent significant changes in the 1980s. In previous decades, resources were scarce, and its participants came from socially complex backgrounds, but despite this, it was a sport that was widely followed and valued by the Spanish population (Calle-Molina & Martínez-Gorroño, 2020a; 2021). In Spain, the decade of the 80's provided the sport with greater resources, however, the positive image of boxing by the population and the media began to decline (Sánchez García, 2009). This circumstance conditioned a rupture between amateur and professional boxing, which was necessary for the former at that historical moment.

This research is, therefore, an unpublished historical rescue. We have recovered the testimony of primary oral sources of the period under study (the decade of the 80s and early 90s), some of them part of the Olympic boxing team at that time. The aim is to bring to light, through the rescue of their stories, the special circumstances and conditioning factors of this sport during that period. Thus, this work recovers its social, cultural, sporting, and economic conditioning factors, as well as the special circumstances of Spanish amateur boxing in the years prior to its participation in the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present research is framed in the History of the Present Time (HPT). The sources used were oral and documentary. The first are identified, according to Grajales Guerra (2002) as “*those directly related in terms of time and space to the event, fact or occurrence under study*” (p.11). A total of six oral sources have participated in this study, all of them primary sources, since they were protagonists of the events they relate and contemporary to the historical period under study. These were identified and categorized, according to the criteria of internal and external criticism to establish the authenticity and genuineness of the source, in order to assess the merit and accuracy of its content (Best, 1982). As shown in Table 1, they were categorized with respect to their relationship with the object of study: Spanish boxing in the 1980s and early 1990s. The technique used was the semi-structured open-ended interview (Hammer and Wildavsky, 1990). The instrument used was an *ad hoc* script, considering aspects related to the category to which the source belonged and to individual questions.

Table 1. Categorization of the oral sources participating in this research.

Category and dimensioning	Oral source
Category 1. Amateur and Olympic boxers prior to the 1980's	Miguel Velázquez Torres
Category 2. Olympic boxers participating in the Olympic Games of Barcelona-92	Javier Martínez Rodríguez; Faustino Reyes López; Óscar Vega Sánchez
Category 3. ADO'92 Technical Commission members	Manuel Llanos Riera
Category 4. Persons related to the sports press (specialized in boxing)	Emilio Marquiegui Rico

The written documentary sources provided primary and secondary information. Subsequently, all the information obtained was analysed and contrasted, considering one of the tasks of the HPT: “*to highlight and ensure the pertinent public projection of everything that still today remains hidden or little studied*” (Saz, 2004, p.83), trying to cover a social need to understand the present (Fazio Vengoa, 1998). In compliance with the guidelines of the ethics of historical research, the oral sources signed two documents, prior to the interview, declaring that they were aware of the historical reconstruction objective of the research and granting permission to record their testimony, as well as for the consultation and use of their personal archives. They

also agreed that their name should not be anonymous, as this research seeks to give voice and recognition to their contribution to a minority sport in a complex historical period.

Evolution of Spanish amateur boxing in the decade of the 1980s

During the decade of the 1980s, a change in the population's perspective on boxing began to manifest itself, showing less tolerance towards violence (Sánchez García, 2009). That vision increased in the decade of the 1990s, in which there was a progressive advance of contemporary society that led to a decrease in the threshold of tolerance towards public and private violence, and specifically in the sports environment (García-Martí et al., 2017).

Historically, amateur boxing had been facing shortages. In addition, the Spanish Boxing Federation (SBF) had experienced periods of instability in its presidency in recent decades (Calle-Molina & Martínez-Gorroño, 2020b). In eleven years, there were four presidents, except for the continuity provided by Eduardo Gallart Baldó as president from 1986 to 1992, when it was occupied by Rubén Martínez.

In addition to the problems caused by the instability of the SBF presidency, there was also the low social acceptance of professional boxing in that period, which inevitably affected amateur boxing. In 1984, Antonio Masip and the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party), who at that time were in charge of the mayor's office in the city of Oviedo, decided to ban boxing in the city. We have been able to recover the main reasons for this from the analysis of the content of the newspaper sources of that time. Thus, in an interview that Masip gave to the newspaper *El País*, he stated that the children of Oviedo who attended the municipal facilities should not watch the boxing spectacle and concluded that interview by saying: *"we must avoid this bad education, like the one I received as a child, when I was a tremendous boxing fan. We must comply with Article 15 of the Spanish Constitution, which prohibits human degradation"* (Masip, in Fuente, 1983, p.1).

As mentioned above, the progressive social change contravened the unconditional acceptance of contact sports such as boxing. Thus, in response to the growing social concern about the increase of violence in sporting events and their surroundings, Law 19/1990 of October 15, 1990 on Sport, contained measures that sought to address that phenomenon by providing: on the one hand, *"to adopt the precepts of the European Convention on violence, drawn up by the Council of Europe and ratified by Spain in 1987"* and, on the other, *"to include some recommendations and measures proposed by the Special Commission on violence in sporting events and unanimously approved by the Senate"* (Law 10/1990, p.30397).

This law made explicit the need that was deemed necessary at that time for the training of athletes, providing for measures by the State Administration, in collaboration with the Autonomous Communities, to provide *"the necessary means for the technical preparation and scientific and medical support of high-level athletes, as well as their incorporation into the educational system and their full social and professional integration"* (Law 10/1990, p.30398). That law, therefore, in addition to confirming the growing social concern about violence in sport, designated new development and training paths for its practitioners. This governmental strategy materialized in economic and administrative aid received by athletes, as well as the creation of sports facilities and structures such as High-Performance Centres or Sports Technification Centres at the regional level (López López, 2011). Therefore, high-level boxing athletes who had been receiving scholarships from their federations at that time began to receive support from other sources. In addition, expenses for the training of technicians, equipment, travel assistance and attendance at competitions were covered (Sánchez Bañuelos, 1989). These circumstances did not occur in previous pugilistic stages. From the testimony of the boxer Miguel Velázquez Torres, we were able to learn that, in his amateur boxing career, decades before, the

fighter who attended competitions did not have to pay for accommodation, food or clothing, but neither did he receive any remuneration if he won victories, a circumstance that changed from the 1980s onwards (Velázquez Torres, 2017).

Manuel Llanos, one of the oral sources of this research, participated together with Emilio Menéndez in the drafting of the Law. His collaboration sought to analyse the distribution of sports federations and their legal personality. From his perspective, the dependence of the autonomic federations on the national federations harmed the economic solvency of the former and, that circumstance, had a negative influence on boxing, a sport that was not reaping promises in the last decade and which lacked economic incentives and popular support (Llanos Riera, 2017).

As an example of the state of amateur boxing, an agreement was reached between the SBF and the Madrid City Council in 1991. As a result, a boxing gym was opened in the basement of the Palomeras Municipal Sports Centre in the Puente de Vallecas district, subsidized by the City Council. It was one of the National Boxing Schools promoted by Eduardo Gallart Baldó, who promoted since 1985 the creation of this type of school. However, the neighbours of the area, according to information gathered from the newspaper *El País*, protested its opening, although the idea was defended by the City Councillor, who considered it an alternative to youth drug use. That school was not advertised on any poster at the request of the neighbourhood, so the knowledge of the possibility of pugilistic activity in that environment was only through acquaintances and by word of mouth. The newspaper sources rescued thus pointed out the general dissatisfaction with the opening of the school:

A group in Vallecas, made up of neighbourhood associations, parishes, and sports groups, opposed the creation of the school, considering that boxing was not a sport that could serve as an example for the children. For the City Councilman of Sports, Manuel Martínez Parrondo, "*boxing is an Olympic sport, like many others*" (Herguera, 1991, paragraph 1).

Since January 1991, Miguel Velázquez, a former Olympic boxer, directed the Boxing School, being replaced months later by Óscar Guzmán, a member of the National Team at that time. Miguel Velázquez considered that that school, like many others, was closed because it did not generate economic benefits (Velázquez Torres, 2017). The courses, subsidized by the SBF, were given to young people between 12 and 18 years of age, requiring parental authorization and later undergoing a medical examination by the SBF. The preparation in those courses consisted of physical exercises, boxing technique and tactics, and the participants were able to compete after having passed the learning phase. At that time, according to the *Diario El País*, applications were scarce, and on many occasions, they were the children of boxers who came because they had nowhere else to train. The intention of the courses was described as follows: "*In the boxing school they recommend its practice because it 'provides physical and moral benefits' and 'shapes the figure, develops muscles and eliminates superfluous fat'*" (Herguera, 1991, paragraph 4).

Regarding these new activities promoted by the SBF, we have had information that Eduardo Gallart, president of the SBF, not only showed interest in the pugilistic training of the boxers who belonged to the National Team, but also in their cultural and social training. Underlying those circumstances we find an article by journalist Antonio Salgado Pérez, boxing specialist and witness of that circumstance. Published in ESPABOX as "*La tribuna: mi adiós a Eduardo Gallart*" ("*The tribune: my goodbye to Eduardo Gallart*"), it showed Eduardo Gallart's concern when he observed the need of those young people to be cultivated and educated, in view of the systematic trips abroad they made and the social circles in which they often developed. And so, this journalist rescued Gallart's words from his memories "*how much I would like, not only to cultivate their muscles, but also their minds*". We have documented the measures that Eduardo Gallart

Baldó adopted to implement the ideas contained in the article. We have been informed of the hiring of a specialist who accompanied the selected boxers and who taught them “*good manners and civility*”. That person not only guided the fighters in their sports career, but also included values and habits that would help them in their professional and life trajectories (Salgado Pérez, 2014). Óscar Vega Sánchez, oral source of this research and witness of that circumstance, subscribed to these statements and considered that those decisions were right, because many of his classmates, in the absence of an environment that provided them, were able to learn aspects that were definitive in their lives (Vega Sánchez, 2017).

In the 1990s, the evolution of boxing tended towards a more open practice that included the middle classes. Although we have noted that already in 1971 boxing began to be used as a form of self-defence by some clubs that began to offer courses (Castillo, 1971), that was an extraordinary circumstance, undoubtedly a precedent of the situation of boxing practice that we can observe today in our country. We can affirm that at the beginning of the 1990s, in addition to the traditional boxing gyms already in existence, other sports complexes were opened in which there was room for boxing without the objective of competition. Other disciplines, such as *boxkarate* in the 1990s, tried to make room for self-defence (El Mundo Deportivo, 1990a), with the aim of softening the violent character of boxing, which at that time was more notorious than ever.

Status of amateur boxing in the media at the end of the 1980s

During the decade of the sixties and seventies, Spanish boxing had undergone a positive evolution, because of which it had managed to obtain many victories of an important level, without previous precedents, in the amateur and professional field. However, great boxing figures who reaped considerable triumphs during the sixties and seventies began to retire from boxing. Thus, in the eighties and nineties, amateur boxing ceased to have national figures of the level previously achieved, and the few figures that began to emerge did not receive the media coverage enjoyed by the fighters who developed their boxing careers in previous decades.

One of the national reference newspapers, El País, maintained its decision to omit publications referring to boxing. Thus, in the 1990, 1993 and 1996 editions of its Style Book¹, it explicitly stated its refusal to publish any news referring to boxing, an aspect that had to be respected by any journalist publishing in that newspaper. One of the fragments of the aforementioned Style Book that made explicit its position on boxing is the following: “*The newspaper does not publish information on boxing competitions, except for those that report on accidents suffered by the fighters or reflect the sordid world of this activity*” and continued, “*the editorial line of the newspaper is contrary to the promotion of boxing, and therefore refrains from collecting news that may contribute to its dissemination*” (Diario El País, 1990; 1993; 1996, p.12).

Other reference newspapers such as La Vanguardia and ABC, following the same trend already started in the previous decades, after the beginning of the democratic period already analysed, experienced a drastic decrease from 1990 with respect to the number of articles published related to boxing (Astor and Riba, 2018). Those newspapers that had provided a systematic coverage of boxing news, such as the newspaper El Mundo Deportivo, ceased their informative task in this field. In the decade from 1980 to 1990, a significant decrease in the number of boxing news can be observed. Thus, there was the publication of some 1400 articles related to boxing news that saw the light of day in the 1980s, compared to a scant 400 that appeared during the 1990s (Astor and Riba, 2018). Likewise, the television attention that the sport received in that last decade of the twentieth century followed the same trend until it became minimal.

¹ *The Style Guide is a guide consisting of a set of criteria with the aim of following a uniform standard. In that case, it was designed for the journalists of El País, as they had to be informed about the ideological line with respect to certain contents, as well as linguistic, style, spelling, typography, and ethical and deontological issues, among many others.*

In 1987, it was already ten years since the withdrawal of this sport's programming on Televisión Española, which was the national reference channel, and even at that time, that circumstance continued to cause controversy. On November 4, 1987, the general director of Spanish Radio and Televisión "Radiotelevisión Española" (RTVE), Pilar Miró, informed the channel's Board of Directors of the need to include in the programming a show that was offered on all the television stations in the world. Therefore, it was intended to rebroadcast boxing on "Estudio 2" from one o'clock in the morning. However, Jordi García Candau and the counsellor of the Partido Socialista Obrero Español, Muñoz Bouza, were against it, because they thought that it was breaking a deal which had been in force for 10 years and because they considered boxing as a violent sport (R.G.G., 1987). Despite the great opposition, professional boxing matches were broadcasted on RTVE until 1989, when Luis Solana took over the direction of the channel.

Some authors, in later research, have considered that boxing went through a great crisis in the eighties. Subsequently, boxers who stood out in those years, such as Manuel Calvo, Rafael Lozano or José Manuel Berdonce (Sánchez García, 2009), and who were not recognized by the media, were known as members of "the lost generation". However, at the end of the eighties, professional boxing got a boost that has been linked to that brief but significant comeback on television, also associated with the appearance of a significant pugilistic figure such as Policarpo Díaz Arévalo "Poli Díaz", who was frequently talked about in numerous media.

Through the content of an interview with boxer Víctor Fernández, published in December 1988 in the newspaper El País, we have been able to rescue, from his statements, a sample of the collective thinking at that time. The pugilist reasoned that boxing in Spain was poorly considered, reflecting that, although there were plenty of fans, there was a lack of pugilistic figures. He pointed out the lack of media coverage and hoped that businessmen such as Enrique Sarasola, promoter of "Poli Díaz", would promote it through economic investment and the invitation of the high social spheres and artists of the time to the professional fights, thus promoting the coverage of the Spanish press (El País, 1988; Fernández at Olmo, 1988).

Despite the decline that had been occurring in Spanish boxing since the late seventies, international organizations took initiatives to encourage the promotion of boxers who were not at the top of the international rankings. The World Boxing Council, with that purpose and with the aim of unifying all boxing commissions, in 1985 decided to organize an international championship so that countries with less economic resources and those boxers who were beginning to stand out in their countries of origin could have some international possibility. Those boxers who were below the first ten positions in the international ranking could compete (Efe, 1985).

However, despite the measures taken, socially, amateur boxing had been suffering a serious deterioration in the eighties, as a result, among other aspects, of the beginning of popular repulsion towards professional boxing. In February 1989, Luis Solana, general director of Radiotelevisión Española (RTVE), expressed his intention to prohibit all broadcasts of professional boxing matches on the television channel. According to the data recovered from the hemerographic sources reviewed, he stated, for example, verbatim in the newspaper ABC: "I am going to reduce boxing matches to the minimum expression: that is, to still photos and the Olympic Games", adding, "this is a measure of authentic communication policy and has been taken for a simple moral approach" (Solana, in Cuéllar, 1989, p.75).

That position was due to his opposition to bullfighting and boxing, which he considered to be violent and not very humane shows. That decision outraged the then president of the SBF, Eduardo Gallart, who described it as a "personal and dictatorial whim", since he considered that there was more violence in other television

content than in boxing (Cuéllar, 1989). Mariano Muñoz, Secretary of the Board of Directors of RTVE, supported Solana's initiative, since he considered that such decision complied with an agreement promoted since 1987, which had been repeatedly breached by Pilar Miró during the period in which she held the presidency of RTVE (Efe, 1989).

An unprecedented rift between amateur and professional boxing

The boxing legislation described in the previous section was adopted because of the numerous scandals that existed in professional boxing in that period, as well as its violent and deteriorated image that evidenced the economic use of the situation of great economic, social and cultural vulnerability in which many of the young Spanish boxers in those years found themselves. That circumstance was worrying for professional boxing and had repercussions in amateur boxing, considering the upcoming 1992 Olympic event in Barcelona and its broadcasting in the television media. Javier Gómez Navarro, Secretary of State for Sport, and Carlos Ferrer Salat, President of the Spanish Olympic Committee (SOC), expressed their concern in February 1989 in declarations to the newspaper ABC, since they did not know the limits of the measure (Frías, 1989a). That concern was because the ADO Program (an organization formed by the Superior Sports Council, the Spanish Olympic Committee and Radiotelevisión Española) made the latter a partner, with amateur boxing being just another sport within the Olympic program.

The SBF responded to that decision with a report from its Legal Counsel in which it was stated that those provisions were a violation of the Spanish Constitution, categorically contradicting the veto imposed by a public institution. Thus, they stated that amateur boxing was governed by the SBF, integrated both in the SOC and in international boxing organizations, so they considered that it met all the legal requirements for its practice, promotion, and dissemination. According to a communiqué from the SBF, by promoting its veto on Spanish public television, four articles of the Spanish Constitution were being violated (El País, 1989; S.T., 1989).

The lack of media coverage by television was another major setback for Spanish boxing, as not only was the broadcasting of professional boxing bouts being vetoed, but also amateur events that needed a definitive boost at that time from different perspectives for the promotion of Olympic boxing. This was corroborated by Manuel Pombo, one of the most influential amateur boxing trainers at that time, in a statement published in the ABC newspaper, a month before the celebration of the Olympic Games: "*We had a hard time with the anti-boxing policy of the Spanish Administration of suppressing evenings in some cities and totally banning it on television*". And he added that this circumstance hurt them a lot "*because from then on we had to start from scratch, working very hard with the kids because we had to attract them and keep them excited in some way*" (Pombo at Frías, 1992).

Although, as mentioned above, in the eighties the presence of amateur boxing in the national newspapers was significantly lower than in previous decades, most of the boxing articles published in the most influential newspapers during 1989 were related to the public dispute between Luis Solana and Eduardo Gallart. Finally, Eduardo Gallart announced in Diario ABC his intention to hold two amateur boxing evenings in April 1989, hoping that those would be broadcasted on public television to show that amateur boxing was not going to be vetoed and was going to be treated as an Olympic sport (Navarrete, 1989).

As a result of all those times, many amateur boxing trainers and coaches tried to emphasize the differences between the amateur and professional boxing, so that at that time there was a fissure between the two. Their separation, especially in the popular ideology, was seen as essential for amateur boxing to survive. On the other hand, that circumstance had an important influence on the general tendency of the amateur boxer

towards boxing professionalization, which clearly diminished, since the incentive of being able to earn money and the idea of obtaining certain fame began to be diluted. Because of all those circumstances, only a few, and with great help from promoters, could dedicate themselves only to boxing, without obtaining any remuneration from other occupations until they could have an acceptable boxing level and begin to receive a scholarship. Other events, such as the suicide in 1992 of José Manuel Ibar, better known as “*Urtain*” (García, 2017), had an impact on the boxing world, as it became evident that the professional outlet that boxing theoretically provided was, in many cases, a momentary and unstable fortune.

The presence of boxing in the television media began to change in the 1990s. According to the testimony offered by Emilio Marquiegui Rico, specialist in boxing journalism and editor of ESPABOX Magazine, this circumstance was due, among other things, to the fact that RTVE ceased to have the television monopoly and other channels began to emerge that maintained a different position with respect to boxing. The incorporation of boxing to the television media at the end of the 90s in the private television channels was definitive: “*Telemadrid, if I remember correctly, Televisión Española a little bit and then Telecinco, which already overlapped Telecinco, Antena Tres and Canal Plus, which was already the bombshell*” (Marquiegui Rico, 2015).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Amateur boxing in the 1980s suffered serious deficiencies in the media coverage on television and in national newspapers, the only media that were widely consumed at that time. That circumstance was due to a violent vision of this sport because of the great popularity of professional boxing in previous decades and its harshness, an aspect that affected amateur boxing, giving rise to a concern about the boxer's welfare that did not exist before, possibly conditioned by the fateful events that took place in the ring at that historical moment. In addition, this new social vision coincided with the establishment of a new political and social period, which advocated sport as a practice for the general population from the perspective of health and social relations. The lack of promotion of boxing in the neighbourhoods or municipalities was a barrier to the recruitment of young people from the surrounding area, which led to a low rate of participation and economic support for the gym and its technicians. Thus, during the period after the Spanish democratic transition, although initiatives to promote sports were promoted and supported, this was not the case with boxing, which, on the contrary, was deprived of a boost for the development of its sports facilities and the recruitment of its practitioners (Abadía i Naudí, 2011). This circumstance began to change in the 1990s, with the birth of other television channels and the integration of new contact sports that began to be included as a generalized practice in sports facilities for the general population.

High level amateur boxing, that is, the fighters who were beginning to make up the National Team, did experience important advances in terms of the economic support they received or an improvement in the facilities in which they trained, because of the general improvement that the sport was beginning to enjoy at that historic moment. However, without the flow of amateur boxers to be included in their neighbourhoods or municipalities due to the lack of institutional support (Abadía i Naudí, 2011) or due to the violent image of this sport shown in the media, grassroots amateur boxing suffered a decline compared to previous decades, which did constitute itself as a sport of national significance and with an identity that evoked another different scale of values. Despite this, support for high-performance amateur boxing contributed in a definitive way to later figures, such as Rafael Lozano, having continuity during three Olympic cycles, a circumstance unthinkable in previous periods due to the harsh family and economic circumstances with which high-performance amateur boxers had to deal (Calle-Molina & Martínez-Gorroño, 2021).

SBF President Eduardo Gallart Baldó began to introduce high-level boxers to learning that would add value to their life trajectories, probably based on the social demand in this regard and the image that the selected boxers could project to the society of that time, preceded by a boxer profile coming from vulnerable social groups, who sought to escape from poverty despite putting their health at risk with a particularly violent activity. Despite the socio-cultural change experienced in Spain in that decade and the generalized negative view of this sport, as well as its scarce media coverage on television and in the press, the celebration of the Games in Barcelona was decisive for its promotion as an amateur and Olympic sport, which was also supported by the creation of the ADO Program, constituting a definitive boost for Olympic boxers from that moment on.

AUTHORS CONTRIBUTIONS

María Teresa Calle- Molina: collection of information, design, analysis and comparison of data and elaboration of results and conclusions. María Eugenia Martínez-Gorroño: collection of information, design, analysis and comparison of data and elaboration of results and conclusions.

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