



9. Norwich Lads' Club – Boxing, Rock concerts, etc

I joined the Lads' Club when I was 14 in 1944 just to play sports like table tennis and football but after a year I got introduced to the boxing section and boxed for the Lads' Club until the 1950s. The club had been bombed and we were more or less in the basement until it was rebuilt in 1951. I rejoined as a coach and ran the boxing section until the 1990s. I was also on the committee for many years. Financially, it was hard work because apart from the boxing section there was nothing else in the club to make money, it was all by donations. The place was costing about £1,000 a week to run, and that was hard money to find.

There's an etiquette in the ring in boxing, but not rules like rugby and so on. The coaches were teaching it from day one. The regime was quite strict down there. If you went down there to box, you trained hard and if you didn't, you didn't box. We probably had six coaches for boxing, good people who had come through the ranks. The London clubs paid for their trainers but round here everything was voluntary. The managers, like John Holder and Ronnie Brooks, they were paid. Beyond that, if you went to another club all you would get was a few pounds for petrol. John Holder did offer to put me on the payroll but I said, "No John, I do this job because I like it.

If you pay me, you'll tell me when to come and go. As it is, I can run it the way I want to run it."

Originally you had to be 14 to join but as the years went on it came down to 10. You could box at 11. I boxed for Norfolk, I got to that stage, but I was a good coach and I trained a lot of boys up to really top standard. I would say that in the 80s we had one of the best teams in the eastern counties, we travelled all over England, and boxed for England in international matches. We were known and respected everywhere. To succeed at boxing, at whatever level, you have to be self-controlled. You get the street bullies, they're never going to make boxers. There's a lot of discipline in boxing. They would start from about 7 stone and upwards, as big as you like. We had a lot of little lads. You never felt uncomfortable with the big chaps - they were the most docile! We'd have had 30 or 40 boys in there, we were open every night of the week, different trainers would take turns to take the boys to London or Nottingham, or wherever.

And quite often, you box people, you stay friends for life. You see them on the telly, swearing at each other and all that, well that's all a front.

People are different now. We were qualified coaches and we were strict with the boys. They came in, they all had to be in on time and they always came and said goodbye to the trainer before leaving. If you didn't do what the trainer said, home you went. We didn't

have time for people messing about. Other sports, you can "have a go", can't you - but don't have a go at boxing unless you are doing it properly.

The parents knew the boys were looked after. That was a sport, if you were a bit wayward, that taught you discipline and you were fit, you lived for it, you didn't have to prove anything to anybody. If they got in trouble outside, one of the trainers would tell them off as well. There was a tremendous amount of boys who might have got in trouble with the law, but your time was taken up with the boxing and you had to be dedicated and didn't have time to mess about outside. There was never any trouble when we all went out together. We had to have paramedics but all the time we were down there, nobody was ever badly hurt. You can get injured - knocked out, even - in any sport. But from the trainer's point of view it's paramount that you put the right person with the right person. You would never let one of your own lads get hurt. Of course, the King George Memorial Hall next door to the Lads' Club was used by the St. John Ambulance for their training, so if there had been an accident, they were on hand.

We'd take boys out a lot, some of these shows would be in big hotels in London, the Grosvenor, Barbican Centre and so on, and it was a good start in life. One of the lads, I gave him an apprenticeship and taught him a trade; he still comes to see me. The age limit for amateur boxers has been altered; it was 35, dropped to 34, and now there is a separate group from 34 to 40

which only boxes in that group.

Ron Springall

Nowadays the Lads' Club, the name, is run from the Hewett School, with a boxing club and so on. People came from all over the country to the Lads' Club, it was probably one of the best gyms anywhere, and the facilities, with the tiered seating and so on, there wasn't a better place in the country to box. We'd have 600-700 boxing fans crammed in there on a Saturday night. Even now we go to shows and there are people with their teenage sons there, people in their 70s and 80s, you all meet and that's lovely.

There were no radios and so on in the gym when you were training, and no girls boxing. The only place they had music was upstairs, for the roller skating. They played snooker in another part; there was a band practice room and the five-a-side football. There was a gymnastics team but that disappeared in the Fifties.

It's strange, you're in there and you're out to win the fight, but you'll come out and have a drink afterwards.

The club just sort of petered out. The ABA - Amateur Boxing Association - have all the records. I think it should have been kept open, as a museum to the city. From the turn of the century right through to the 1990s, there were hundreds and hundreds of boys it helped out. It kept them out of trouble. Originally, boys who got into trouble had to go down there for the police part of it, but after that, there were so many

people it benefited. Whereas now, there's nothing like it. If you took some of those boys who are in trouble nowadays, and put them in there, they'd soon sort them out. You could travel anywhere in England, talk to the boxing fraternity, everyone knew the Lads' Club.

Andy Springall

It was the first Lads' Club in England. Several people copied the idea, but that was the most famous. The guys who are commentating on TV now boxed at the Lads' Club - Nicky Piper, Nigel Benn - and we'd have famous boxers like Don Cockell as guests of honour. Herbie Hide, he was World Champion, John Thaxton; boxers like Stevie Sadd were known all over England. And the camaraderie remains. Good days; I'd love to turn the clock back.

I was introduced to the Lads' Club by a friend, John King, when I was just under 12 years old. From Monday to Friday evenings, most of the boys would be at the Lads Club. I think we paid about 3d or 6d to come in. It was a massive building. We had a big room at the top, with seats down one side and stage at the far end, with room enough to have an indoor football pitch for five-a-side. We would come and play snooker, table tennis, there was a little canteen downstairs run by a very nice lady called Mrs. Rowley. No alcoholic drinks, although there was a little pub across the road from the club called the Swan and when we were older we would go and have a drink there.

It was a happy atmosphere and well run. It made for a good community feeling, because there were boys you knew from school and they would keep coming after they had started work. Three or four of us volunteered to paint the club and we were treated to a slap-up meal at the Lansdowne Hotel on Yarmouth Road. Apart from youth clubs, you did not have a lot to do at that time, unlike today. It's a shame today that there are not so many youth clubs. I didn't try the boxing although I remember Ginger Sadd, every time he saw you he would ask if you would like to have a go.

Denis McGee

The first pop concert I remember at the Lads' Club around 1970-71 was going with my older brothers to see Yes, with Groundhogs and Dada as support, which consisted of Elkie Brooks and Robert Palmer. They had big bands - Derek and the Dominoes, the Who, Traffic, Pink Floyd. It was standing only, really crowded, a rather cold concrete floor. Prices were comparatively cheap, compared with today's gigs at Carrow Road.

Ian Millins

I believe it was the first boys club in the country and I know the chief constable was praised all round the country for what he'd done here in Norwich. I thought it was an exceptionally nice building. At one end was a big board with all names of people who'd won all the trophies. And we did have a lot of trophies - perpetual trophies awarded for Best Boxer of the Year, and so on - although most of them seem to have

disappeared later. A Mr. and Mrs. Holder ran the club, then a fellow called Ronnie Brooks ran it until it closed down. I believe it cost something like £35,000 a year to run the building in the early days and I don't believe they could get charity status in the later years and that is why they had to close. A consortium including Herbie Hide tried to buy the building but were unsuccessful.

During the early 50s there was very little for young people to do in Norwich so with some friends I came to have a look at the Lads' Club. I chose to do boxing and boxed there from 1953-58, until I joined the army, and later I used to do Master of Ceremonies at the boxing matches. My father and uncle used to come to all the tournaments at the club. My trainer was a man who had only one leg. Training: we used to go out running and train with pads, gloves and punch bags and a speedball. Training was exceptionally hard; if you didn't turn up and train, they would ask you to leave. I used to go three times a week.

It was a lovely building. There was a deep well in the centre where the ring was set up and a balcony for the audience. It was a very good and well run club. We used to get introduced to people like Ginger Sadd, who was a well-known professional boxer, and his two brothers. In later years his brother Dick Sadd came into the printers where I worked and I said I'd boxed at the Lads' Club; Dick being Dick didn't believe this until he had checked it all out with his records. I boxed against

HMS Ganges, some of the Essex clubs, we went to the Isle of Wight and once to Germany when Tom Eaton was Lord Mayor. Boxing gave me self-respect; I was still very young when I went into the Army and I was already ahead of the game in being self-sufficient and doing things for yourself, in contrast to some of the boys who had never left home before. As for King Street itself, there were always girls hanging around outside because there were a lot of boys using the club for its various activities. I also remember all the breweries that were down here, that brewery smell and atmosphere. It was a bit dingy really although this top end came alive in the evening.

Dick Sadd ran the old Norfolk Boxers' Association and he did make one or two videos about the old professional Norwich boxers, and we had quite a few who did extremely well, besides Ginger Sadd had something like 270-odd contests and won all but 48.

Herbert Slaughter

I came to the Pink Floyd concert at the Lads' Club around 1970 - a big crowd, no support act, and the band took their time coming on, but when they did it was a very special show, they had a big light show, quadrophonic sound equipment, so sound was sent all the way round the room, and I came out with my ears ringing. The other concert I remember was Derek and the Dominoes, with Eric Clapton and some American musicians. I'd had to come away from my cousin's wedding reception at the Baker's Dozen on Waterloo Road to come to that one.

Clapton played a long set and it went on so late that my father came out looking for me because I hadn't come home!

Nigel Phipps

Norwich Lads' Club was the oldest boys' club in the country. My father was a member in the early 1930s. I became a member about 1975. I used to come in on my scooter from Heartsease. I started off playing snooker, then around that time they started introducing girls into the club because of the roller skating. I'd played roller hockey in the old Norwich Rollerdrome, on the Plumstead Road, which had closed in 1972 so when the Lads Club started roller skating, I used to go down there. Wednesday was the big night of the week for roller skating, that would be packed out with kids, that was the highlight of the week.

Roller hockey is a very old sport. It has been played in Norwich for over a hundred years. I've traced it back to 1904 and the first team to win the East Anglian League was a Norwich team, in 1907. Before the Rollerdrome it was played in a place just off the market. When I tried to introduce it at the Lads' Club it was turned down as being too dangerous and the figure skaters didn't want to lose any of their rink time, but we did eventually get it started in 1982. The club was not really big enough but over time we managed to get the floor bigger and bigger by taking out other things from the hall - stage, coffee bar, seating and so on. Unfortunately, by that time the Lads' Club had only two years to survive.

Teams came from all over the country to play there. We entered the Eastern Counties League in 1984 and beat Cambridge 7-5 in our first game at the Lads' Club. We played teams like Kings Lynn, Bury St. Edmunds, Felixstowe, Ipswich, and in our first season we came second in the League. That was mainly adults but later we had junior teams, under-13s and under-15s. We only had one team, mostly 18, 19, early 20s. Our first big win was at Houghton Regis, near Luton; it was an invitation cup and we beat Ipswich 6-5 in the final and the winning goal was scored in the last minute by my old friend Glen Bradfield, who does coaching now for us. We went ballistic, beating the old rivals! A couple of times we went to an Easter tournament in Guernsey. In those days it was the Norwich Lads' Club Roller Hockey Team but we have changed it now to Norwich City Roller Hockey Club. I was the trainer as I was the only one who'd had any experience of playing it so of course I had to go on coaching and first aid courses. We had to do everything from scratch, although as more money came in we got proper equipment and our own strip with the Lads' Club logo and so on. We had to buy personal equipment like shin pads and sticks but the club helped with goals and kit. Mondays was roller hockey night.

I became a Youth Leader in the early 80s. We used to do table tennis, five-a-side football, snooker, pool, and there were also activities for local pensioners such as short mat bowls in the King George Hall. Ronnie Brooks

introduced that; the place was empty during the day, so he tried to get it more into community use. I also played badminton there at dinner time with my work colleagues from ECN. The main opening hours were 7 till 10, unless there was some special event. Boxing started about 5 o'clock, that was downstairs in the gym. Kick boxing and judo were introduced later.

We were asked to do some fundraising so I suggested a roller marathon - like the one they had in London on Battersea Park - but we couldn't find anywhere to do it, then I thought of Chapelfield Gardens. City Council said we could do it as long as it was properly organised. That took a lot of work but we did the full marathon which in terms of the Gardens was 72 and a half laps. Our first roller marathon was 1985, 300 people entered and we raised over £2,000 for Cherish the Child Appeal. They became an annual event; I think the last was about 1990.

The Lads' Club always entered a float in the Lord Mayors Procession. In 1991 the theme was Fairy Tales and Myths and we did the Old Lady in the Shoe, we actually made a massive great boot with a roof. Next year the theme was Sport and we had this old boot sitting down the basement of the Lads' Club and Ronnie Brooks kept on saying, "What the hell are we going to do with this?" - it was about 7 ft long and 5 ft high - so I thought, let's lop the little shed thing off and convert it to a football boot, so that's what I did. We got a fold-up goal and giant football and all the boys dressed up in football kits.

The Lads' Club differed from a regular youth club through its tradition. It had been started by the police and in my father's day most of the boys who went to the club were sent there to be disciplined - boys in trouble were either sent to Borstal or to the Lads' Club. The Lads' Club had written rules which were printed on the back of the membership card and you had to have membership. I think that carried on through to the 60s, then it became more of a youth club, then from 1975 when they let girls in it became more of a youth club than a boys club. That was through roller skating. At the time there were very few other activities for young people in Norwich - I think that is why the roller skating was so massively popular and after the Lads' Club closed a purpose-built rink was opened, near the airport.

There were sporting stars who came out of the Lads' Club. Roller skating, there was Jocelyn Taylor, who did the figure skating - she was a very famous coach from Yarmouth - and her son Ashley Moore. We still have some boys play for England at roller hockey. It's a professional sport in places like Spain and Portugal. The Fashanu brothers, Justin and John, also started down the Lads' Club. There were boxers like Herbie Hide and John Thaxton. Some boxing nights were quite posh dos, with a meal while people watched the boxing.

Lads' Club did give these youngsters discipline; some of these boys were rough, got in trouble with the law, and

the Club seemed to put these youngsters right. Nowadays there is nothing like it. It did its job and I feel that should still be open today. There is a place for it even today, although at the time it was closed in the mid-90s they said there wasn't. The police should have backed the Lads' Club, and said there was a need for a club. Maybe somewhere else; we should have moved to bigger premises when the money was coming in from the roller skating. It gave people purpose. We had a lot of youngsters who were being expelled from school and the roller hockey gave them some interest and they turned into decent citizens.

When the club was closed, a lot was thrown away but I still have some memorabilia; my old skates, a lot of the medals and cups we won, and a pre-war framed photograph which I have given to the present Lads' Club Boxing Club at the Hewett. Our members had to find other venues wherever they could; the activities carried on, but that wasn't the same.

Tim Nelson