

Boxing Ring at Unified Academy



Building emotional strength in the boxing ring at the Unified Academy

The discipline of boxing demands a high level of skill, commitment, and strength, both physically and mentally - and whilst some may dismiss the sport as too aggressive, Unified Academy has proven that it instils discipline, resilience, and respect in young people with complex behavioural needs.

Aligned with the school's values of showing one another respect and compassion, boxing has been introduced over the past few years to more than 160 students aged 9–16 with social, emotional, and mental health needs. "Boxing is embedded into our culture, it's part of what we do. The pride that the students display through boxing, for both themselves and the school, is striking. We're certainly breaking stereotypes," explains Mrs Thomas, Principal.

Maximising morale

Assistant Principal, Mr Nicholls introduced low-level boxing in the PE curriculum several years ago, and it has since become a key part of the school. In fact, Unified Academy's unique journey has taken an exciting turn and most recently has been gifted a state-of-the-art professional boxing ring.

In the early stages there wasn't a specialist facility or resources on-site. Instead, any available space was utilised, be it the sports hall or on occasions, even classrooms.

"There are so many brilliant moments that happen around boxing at Unified Academy."

Mrs Thomas, Principal

The sport rapidly gained momentum and following the introduction of boxing as part of the GCSE PE qualification, many students chose the discipline as their assessment activity. As interest grew, two additional ABA (Amateur Boxing Alliance) qualified coaches from a grassroots amateur boxing club were recruited to provide one-to-one, two-to-one and small group sessions.

In tandem, Friday enrichment sessions enabled students to not only benefit from the coaching of a boxing instructor for the training side, but also for personal development such as teamwork and leadership skills. "Attendance on a Friday soared because the students wanted to take part. By responding to their feedback and getting a boxing instructor on-board, our students feel listened to, they feel valued," enthuses Mrs Thomas.



An invaluable facility – the professional boxing ring

Unified Academy has strong connections with The Unit Gym in Harlington which has always supported other schools within the Trust, with many students using its facilities. Now, with thanks to its incredibly generous donation, the professional boxing ring takes pride of place in the fitness studio at Unified Academy along with a selection of other equipment previously donated.

The team at Unit Gym said "The boxing ring is making a real difference to the lives of young people. For many boys, it's the first time that they've stepped into a boxing ring and it has boosted their confidence, self-discipline and respect for others. We have built a well-established alliance with OCH&AT, and it's a privilege to help give young people who face challenges and adversities a chance to thrive,"

Whilst the framework for the ring was constructed over the Summer, the students gained a real sense of ownership and responsibility by setting up the ropes and padding to ensure it was on track to use at the start of the Autumn term.

Today, the fitness studio houses a professional boxing ring plus a range of equipment including freestanding punch bags, hanging boxing bags, speed balls, battle ropes, medicine balls, skipping ropes, and even a sparring BOB (a training bag dummy); equipment and accessories usually found in a professional boxing gym.

Boxing at Unified Academy



Creating a sense of community

Teamwork and camaraderie between the students has improved, and students often complete press ups together or practice their boxing combinations and speed with one another using pads.

Utilised daily, the boxing ring encourages students to step out of their comfort zone and has paved the way for new opportunities, enabling the students to connect more with visitors to the school and the local community. Mrs Thomas explains, “Many students would never have interacted with external visitors before, but now they feel more comfortable and safer in their surroundings and are proud to show staff, parents and visitors a challenging 20 set combination – it’s their chance to shine.”

This passion for boxing extends beyond the school walls too, with one student travelling from Surrey to the club in Uxbridge to train. “Our strong connection with The Unit Gym provides students with an opportunity to join the local community, which for some is challenging and quite daunting. The Unit Gym is however very accommodating for our students, it’s a safe, respectful environment,” continues Mr Nicholls.

Inspiring self-confidence & trust

The staff at Unified Academy credit boxing with a multitude of benefits and there is clear respect and understanding for each other, as well as a recognition of adversity in others.

“There are so many brilliant moments that happen around boxing at the Academy, which I’m keen to harness and make a big part of what we do. I’m a huge believer in sports and its benefits - it’s good for students to have an outlet that they love. I’ll never forget a student showing me a 20 boxing combination with absolute pride, and students cheering each other on – boxing is an invaluable avenue for our students to show their true worth,” concludes Mrs Thomas.

“Boxing is an effective way for students to emotionally regulate. For instance, if a student needs a quick outlet, they come out of the classroom for 15 minutes, do some exercise and boxing in the ring and return to class in a more settled state, for more sustained periods of time.”

Mr Nicholls, Assistant Principal

Finding inner strength to overcome obstacles

Boxing has been a completely new experience for many, and staff have recognised just how meaningful it is for students’ mental health, engaging with young people in a way that other sports can’t.

Mr Nicholls explains, “When the students are boxing you can see their enjoyment. These are complex young men, yet there’s laughter, care, and compassion in the boxing ring. It helps develop a sense of worth, confidence and self-esteem, and has instilled a profound sense of discipline and respect.”

Unified Academy has also ensured cross curricula links. For instance, food tech classes draw on the health and nutrition aspect of boxing, with students acquiring a better understanding of the best foods to fuel the body and preserve energy levels. Similarly, some students use boxing towards their Duke of Edinburgh award.

On occasions, the students even bring other schoolwork into the boxing ring, and the coach has even been known to teach boxing combinations whilst also helping the students master the Pythagoras theorem!

The academic outcomes speak for themselves and this year, of the 15 students who entered the GCSE PE exam, 100% passed. “Having taught GCSE PE and recognising the challenges that students face around literacy and retention, being able to say to

them that boxing accounts for 40% of the grade, and that they can walk into the exam having already achieved that is a real boost. It makes them want to keep on trying, it creates a can-do attitude.”

Vocationally, several students who have moved into further education have selected to study sports or personal training, while one student’s ambitions are set on becoming a professional boxer.

Boxing at Unified Academy:

- Strengthens emotional wellbeing
- Raises concentration levels
- Increases self-confidence & self-belief
- Reduces feelings of loneliness
- Reduces anxiety & stress
- Enables social development
- Boosts physical fitness
- Builds understanding around nutrition & healthy eating
- Instils respect