

PUNCH ONE-TWO

**WESTPORT MOMS, DADS
AND EVEN KIDS ARE GETTING
INTO THE RING TO DISCOVER
THE LATEST WORKOUT TREND:
NO-CONTACT BOXING**

What do a dentist, a Westport housewife, and a four-year-old boy have in common? If you said boxing gloves, you're pretty hip. Squash might be the sport to practice if you're looking for a college scholarship these days, but boxing is the hottest trend in fitness for the rest of us. Yes, even those who are afraid to get hit.

"I want a bumper sticker, you know?" says Westport mom Tyler Burton. "Like the ones that read 'My kid is an honor student at ...' Only mine will say, 'My mom boxes at Westport Boxing.'"

It's true, Tyler spars regularly and credits the sport with helping her drop twenty pounds "right off the bat." She hardly looks like she needed to, but she says she owes it all to boxing.

BY SHERRI DALEY

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRUCE PLOTKIN



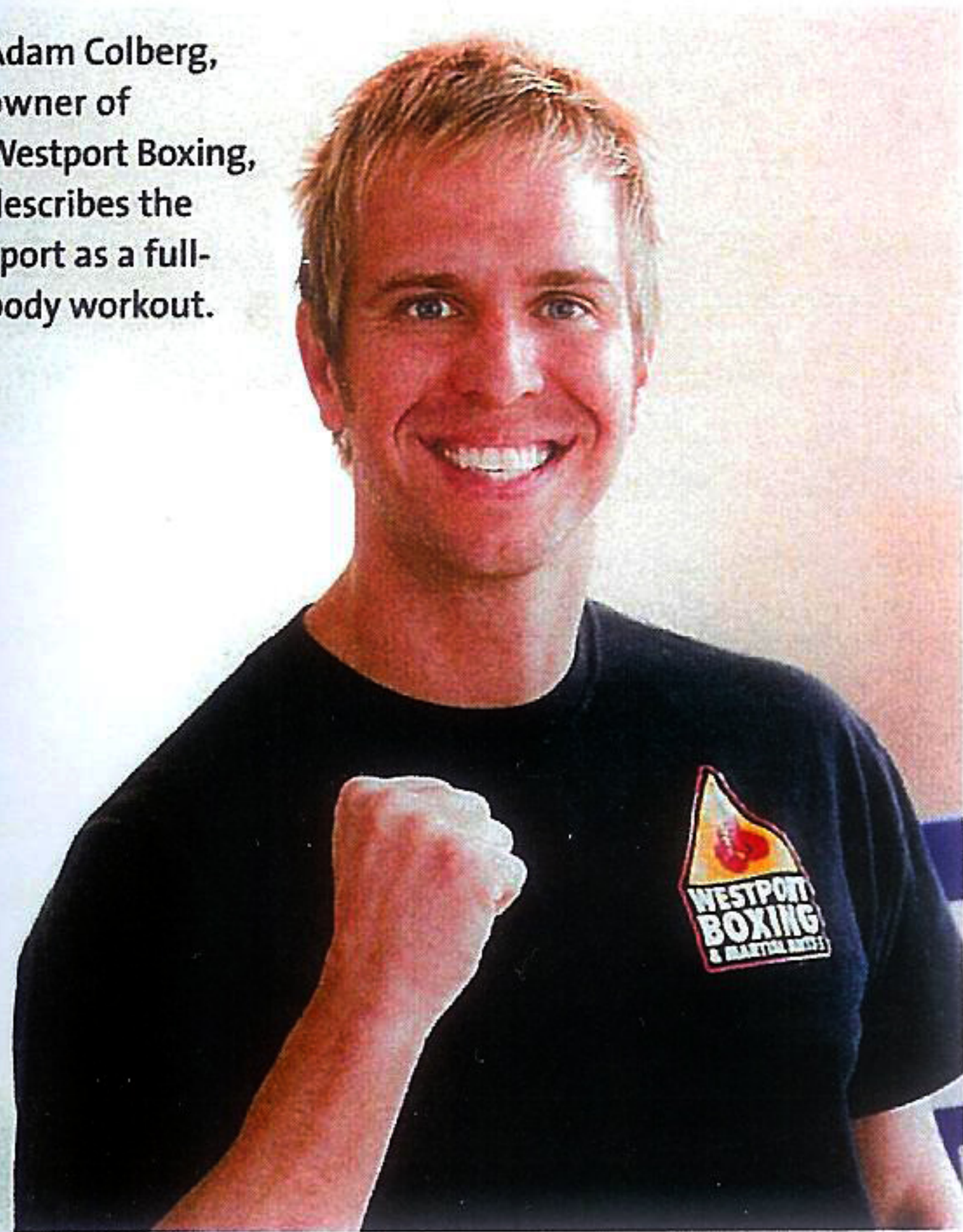


"I TRIED EVERYTHING TO STAY IN SHAPE. NOTHING DID IT LIKE BOXING."

"I hate working out in a gym," she shakes her head. "It's so monotonous. But I tried everything to stay in shape. I power-walked, I cycled, I learned karate. Nothing did it like boxing. It's great cardio, it improved my posture and it's not what people think. It's not a killer sport."

Adam Freeman also trots out his alter ego in the ring. Concerned, competent, compassionate dentist by day, he's a boxer during his thrice-weekly workout. "I love lifting," says Dr. Freeman, "but weight-training can get old. And in the past, I found myself not being constant, getting bored and quitting. Because of my job, my back sometimes really hurts at the end of the day. I need that workout at the gym."

Adam Colberg, owner of Westport Boxing, describes the sport as a full-body workout.



In his crisp blue smock, looking nothing like Sly Stallone, the good doctor explains why he likes to box. "It's different from any other exercise because the trainer is invested in your workout. He's not just holding a clipboard, counting out your reps. Your trainer spars with you. He interacts with you."

The traditional visual of a boxing gym has been a poorly lit, shabby club in a bad part of the city — a place where juvenile delinquents, high-school dropouts and guys down on their luck pin their dreams and work out their aggressions. Think of Stallone's Rocky and his trainer, Mick, played by scruffy, foul-mouthed Burgess Meredith. But all that's been changing for a long while. First came the Wall Street brokers with their yellow power ties, rolling up their sleeves and climbing in the ring for fisticuffs on Friday nights. Sparring fed their egos and lowered their blood pressure while ensuring that white-collar boxing is no longer an oxymoron.

"It clears my head," says Paul Reiferson, a 41-year-old hedge-fund manager who lives in Weston. He admits he's addicted. "I started two and a half years ago, just to get in shape. I wasn't doing anything before. No workout, no running — nothing. In the meantime I've lost 40 pounds."

SAVING FACE

On a sunny afternoon in January, Reiferson laces on his gloves to spar with Terry Southerland, Westport Boxing's program director. Southerland has the calm and practiced look of a classic boxer. A former professional fighter, he's easy on his feet and comfortable avoiding Reiferson's jabs. Before going pro, he fought as a member of the United States Amateur

Boxing Team, competed around the world and won three national championships.

The two men circle each other warily, their eyes barely visible behind their protective helmets and gloves. Their muscles twitch and sweat runs down their necks. Southerland swiftly touches a glove to Reiferson's midsection; neither man smiles.

If this sounds a little scary to you — especially the part about Southerland's experience in the ring — you're not alone. Great workout or not, everyone's biggest fear about stepping into a boxing ring is the same: getting hit. Hard. Especially in the face. No one wants to take a punch, but visions of broken noses and black eyes can make you want to run back to the safety of good ol' elliptical machines. Not to worry, however. A popular option at the gym is no-contact boxing. That is, no contact from trainer to student; you're free to swing away as hard as you like. (Chances are you won't hit anything important anyway.) Your trainer will never hit back; the most you'll get, as Southerland has just demonstrated, is a little tap, a friendly reminder that you left your midsection open.

"We're very careful," says Adam Colberg, founder, trainer and owner of the gym located on the Post Road just north of Greens Farms. Tall and blond and disarmingly congenial, Colberg is a Staples graduate and a former Marine. He interrupted his studies at Southern Connecticut State University to fight in the Persian Gulf War in 1993, and has earned three black belts in karate. "That's why we're pros!"

And yet, Colberg insists, "We don't spoil anyone. We treat everyone as if they're training for their first pro fight. And they love it. We push them hard and make them dig deep. That's the only way to train."

Jim Dolen, another boxing student, watches the two men carefully in the ring. "A sparring session is a terrific workout," he says, "but it's the emotional impact that appeals to me. Gets all the endorphins in the brain going. Problems are gone: anger, depression, boredom." He nods at the ring. "This takes care of all that."

Forty minutes into the session, Reiferson's shoulders slump. "I've had it," he says to Southerland, looks at the clock and removes his mouth guard. His clothes are soaked. "My boys should be here soon."

And there they are: Clay, four, Beck, seven, and Mack, eight. Polite little powerhouses, they lace up their gloves and jump around eagerly, jabbing at the air while trainer Josh Vavala vies for their attention. In a minute, the boys are practicing jabs, hooks and right crosses like artfully choreographed street urchins.

LEARNING FROM THE PROS

Working moms, stockbroker dads, kids, dentists and doctors are all serious about what they can learn from the sport, but professionals also use the ring at Westport Boxing. Montreal pro Joachim Alcine and his world-renowned trainer Howard Grant together prepared for the fight that won Alcine the Junior Middleweight title last summer. Fifteen-year-old Ross Gendels has scored himself a trainer who is the major contender for the next world championship — Maureen “Mo” Shea, who was Hillary Swank’s sparring partner while Swank trained for her Oscar-winning role in *Million Dollar Baby*.

While Maureen fully intends to be the champ, her student just wants to be a better wrestler and rugby player. “I was very excited to get in the ring with her,” Ross says. “She gets right to the boxing, no wasting time with a lot of warm-ups. She’s not a fitness coach. She’s here to teach boxing, and I really learn from her. I learn strategy. We work on my stance.”

“We call Maureen the real Million Dollar Baby,” Colberg says as watches them spar. Occasionally Maureen taps Gendels with her huge gloved hand to make a point. He bobs his helmeted head and tentatively moves left and right as she leads. Colberg says, “It isn’t everywhere that you can train with athletes of her caliber. You used to have to go to Gleason’s to get anywhere near professionals. That’s where Mo met Hilary Swank. Swank approached Hector Roca for a sparring partner, and he paired her up with Maureen.”



Colberg may be dropping names, but he’s also highlighting what’s so special about this particular experience versus working out in other gyms with only speed and heavy bags. Hector Roca, for example, is a world-famous trainer; and Gleason’s Gym has been synonymous with boxing for over seventy years, turning out, among others, Jake LaMotta, Floyd Patterson, Muhammad Ali, George Forman, Joe Frazier and Mike Tyson. But even Gleason’s sees what’s happening to the future of boxing.

Bruce Silverglade, owner of Gleason’s and author of *The Gleason’s Gym Total Body Boxing Workout for Women*, embraces the changes, including the addition of women to a traditionally male-dominated sport. “The fastest-growing segment in boxing is women,” he says. “Mostly college educated, in it for the fitness. Few women want to fight, but they’re great to train. Unlike men, they have no bad habits to erase.”

Colberg has a long history with Gleason’s, which has done much to establish a real presence for Westport Boxing in the area, but maybe the best thing to come of it is the improvement of a little girl’s soccer game. Colberg trains Silverglade’s ten-year-old granddaughter, Gallant. “Adam’s terrific with her,” says her father David Silverglade, an archeologist who lives and works in Easton. “She’s boxing to stay in shape for soccer. She’s an amazing goalie.”

Of course, not everyone needs a former pro middleweight to train him (or her). Many fitness and martial arts gyms offer kickboxing as a popular alternative.

MAUREEN SHEA’S TOP-TEN TIPS FOR NEW BOXERS

- 1 DIET** Get that body fat down, but don’t go hungry. Eat smaller meals more often.
- 2 HYDRATE** Always have a bottle of water handy and sip from it often.
- 3 BUILD UP CORE STRENGTH** That means a lot of abdominal work, like crunches and exercises with a stability ball.
- 4 DON’T IGNORE CARDIO** Although resistance training is good for fitness, focus on cardiovascular exercise. Jumping rope is the boxer’s signature workout. Start slow, but do some sort of cardio at least three times a week.
- 5 LEARN HOW TO STAND** In the ring, it starts and ends with a powerful, focused stance.
- 6 PRACTICE YOUR PUNCHES** Do the five basic punches over and over: jab, right cross, uppercut, left hook and right hook.
- 7 HIT THE BAG** For strength and coordination, punch the heavy bag.
- 8 FOCUS** Do your best to keep distractions out of the ring.
- 9 STUDY YOUR OPPONENT** If you’re going to fight, you need to know who you’re fighting.
- 10 BE FLEXIBLE** Whoever adapts best wins — which is good advice no matter what you’re doing.

“BOXING IS AN ALMOST **PERFECT** **WHOLE BODY** **WORKOUT.**”



“Classic American boxing is easier on your back, though,” says Dolen, who at fifty-five admits that he’s not as flexible as he once was. “I still maintain that boxing is an almost perfect whole body workout.”

Kelly Zimmerman owns and operates Kelly & Co. One to One Fitness on the Post Road in Westport. Although she doesn’t offer boxing instruction, the sport is very much in line with her way of fitness thinking. “Being involved in the fitness industry for more than twenty years, I’ve seen a lot of trends come and go,” says Kelly. “What seems to be most beneficial for any fitness level is using your body and body weight. For example, push-ups, pull-ups, medicine ball work, agility work, jumping — all activities included in a fighter’s training. No machines.”

Including boxing in a regular workout definitely helps an athlete develop and improve in other sports, but there’s another benefit of boxing: effective self-defense. Tyler Burton says she’s boxing for fitness, but the fact that she can defend herself is another one of the perks. Dr. Freeman agrees. His training came in handy when he and his son were assaulted last year.

“My son had just finished an ‘Iron Man’ competition in Madison, Wisconsin,” Dr. Freeman explained. “I was walking him back to the hotel when some drunk bumped into us. Then he actually threw a couple of punches at me. I didn’t even have to think: I was able to block the punches and take him down, just like I was taught at the gym.”

A surprising reaction from a man who usually starts his sparring sessions by saying (as so many others do), “Don’t hit me.” **W**