

Liberia's First Professional Boxer

TRAILER

Liberians use boxing to heal wounds of war but economic constraints make turning professional a struggle. And finally a Malagasy musician who learnt to play the harmonica when he was 9 tells us how he's managed to stay on top, almost 40 years later.

RUNTIME: 06:27

COUNTRY: LIBERIA

FILMING LOCATION: MONROVIA

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

SOURCE: A24 MEDIA/REUTERS

SCRIPT

COMMENTARY

For wannabe contenders in Liberia, 'Baby Joe's House of Pain' right in the centre of the capital Monrovia is the only gym to train.

It was founded decades ago by 'Baby' Joe Boaker, Liberia's first professional boxer and one-time international coach.

George 'The Hurricane' Kpangbai is one of the country's new big hopefuls. The 29-year-old has been boxing since he was a teenager and sees boxing as his main career. But in between training five times a week he still has to work as a personal trainer to earn a living.

ITV, GEORGE KPANGBAI, Boxer (English)

“I love the game, I know it’s not easy for me but I’m still into it and believe in God that he’s gonna take me there.”

COMMENTARY

When Baby Joe died in 2006, Arku Kortee became the new national coach. Trained by Joe, he boxed internationally for Liberia and represented his country at the 1992 Olympic Games.

He now coaches around 30 fighters but only 13 can train regularly because of the limited space and facilities. But he thinks that boxing has great potential here.

ITV, ARKU KORTEE, Head Coach (English)

“In 2002, we took 4 boxers to Benin, for all African games qualifying, and we brought 2 bronze. In 2006 we took 2 boxers to Abuja for a knockout game and we brought one silver and one bronze. I think if the Liberian government and Liberian people can support boxing, I think it will bring pride to the Liberian people as a sport.”

COMMENTARY

In a decade of civil war, hundreds of thousands of Liberians died and much of the country was destroyed. Idi Amin once swam in this pool at Monrovia’s Ducor Hotel – now in ruins.

Many of George’s generation were forcibly recruited into rebel factions and see boxing as a way to heal their wounds.

ITV, GEORGE KPANGBAI, Boxer (English)

*“In the ring you have to be tolerant so sometimes you receive some nasty punches and sometimes you get over angry and p****d off, vexed. Yet still you have to control your*

temper so that you can be able to fight constructively because you want to win and you must be able to respect the rules and regulations governing it in the ring. Because there's a ref there, you know ref in this boxing game you must respect him first. You must respect you opponent also, no matter what, so it teaches tolerance. That's what boxing does, and I've been so tolerant since I came to boxing."

COMMENTARY

When night falls over Monrovia, it's time for the boxers to test their skills in sparring matches against each other. But getting to this level is impossible for most young people who dream of boxing. Unemployment stands at 80% so it's tough to find enough money to eat, let alone train.

And there isn't a standard-size ring in the whole of Liberia. This one is a donation from Irish peace-keepers and it's smaller than international boxing rings.

Marbue Richards is the country's assistant minister of sports. The annual budget allocated to boxing is only 3000 US dollars, and sometimes the Finance Ministry only pays out half of that amount; but he says it's better than nothing.

ITV, MARBUE RICHARDS, Assistant Minister of Sports (English)

"For the first time in our history we have budgetary allotments made to the various sporting disciplines, boxing being one of those. So the effort is to try take focus away from just football, we used to be called 'the ministry of football'. We try to give the impression and we try our best to try and place some emphasis on other sporting disciplines."

COMMENTARY

But 3000 dollars doesn't send boxers to international competitions. George qualified for the 2003 and 2006 West African Championships but couldn't afford to go. So his plan B

is to study management, so on top of training and working, he also attends classes every day at Monrovia's Stella Maris Polytechnic.

ITV, GEORGE KPANGBAI, Boxer (English)

"I come to school to learn because at the end of the day, when I'm through with boxing when I have reached my peak, and decide to retire I just don't want to be an empty headed boxer. I want to be somebody that can be capable of working as a manager in an entity, controlling working activities, controlling people, interacting with people, doing my own business, assisting people, and as well even counselling people as a boxer."

COMMENTARY

Meanwhile sports journalist Fombah Kanneh looks forward to the day when talented boxers like George don't have to have a day-job to afford to stay in training.

ITV, FOMBAH KANNEH (English)

"Boxing is a great sport, it's a fantastic sports through boxing, the Liberia, as a football nation we have George Weah right? And through boxing maybe we can produce the next Mohammed Ali, or Mike Tyson. Who knows? We have the talents here, we have the people here, but again, the support got to be coming. You have to put your money where your mouth is or else you just be heading nowhere."

COMMENTARY

But George, not wanting to wait, has decided to pack up and move to Ghana instead, where there are better facilities and more money. If Liberia doesn't start investing in its boxers, then many of the country's most ambitious athletes may decide to follow him.

SHOTLIST

(AJ) MONROVIA, LIBERIA (RECENT) (REUTERS – ACCESS ALL)

1. VARIOUS TRAINING AT THE GYM

2. (SOUNDBITE) (English) LIBERIAN BOXER, GEORGE KPANGBAI, SAYING:

“I love the game, I know it’s not easy for me but I’m still into it and believe in God that he’s going to take me there.”

3. COACH TRAINING WITH GEORGE

4. (SOUNDBITE) (English) HEAD COACH, ARKU KORTEE, SAYING:

“In 2002, we took 4 boxers to Benin, for all African games qualifying, and we brought 2 bronze. In 2006 we took 2 boxers to Abuja for a knockout game and we brought one silver and one bronze. I think if the Liberian government and Liberian people can support boxing, I think it will bring pride to the Liberian people as a sport.”

5. GEORGE SHADOW BOXING IN EMPTY SWIMMING POOL AT THE RUINED DUCOR HOTEL

6. (SOUNDBITE) (English) LIBERIAN BOXER, GEORGE KPANGBAI, SAYING:

“Even in the ring you have to be tolerant so sometimes you receive some nasty punches and sometimes you get over angry and p****d off, vexed. Yet still you have to control your temper so that you can be able to fight constructively because you want to win and you must be able to respect the rules and regulations governing it in the ring. Because there’s a ref there, you know ref in this boxing game you must respect him first. You must respect you opponent also, no matter what, so it teaches tolerance. That’s what boxing does, and I’ve been so tolerant since I came to boxing.”

7. ASSISTANT MINISTER OF MARBUE RICHARDS SPORTS IN OFFICE

8. VARIOUS OF SPARRING MATCHES

9. (SOUNDBITE) (English) ASSISTANT MINISTER OF SPORTS, MARBUE RICHARDS, SAYING:

“For the first time in our history we have budgetary allotments made to the various sporting disciplines, boxing being one of those. So the effort is to take focus away from just football, we used to be called ‘the ministry of football’. We try to give the impression and we try our best to try and place some emphasis on other sporting disciplines.”

10. VARIOUS OF GEORGE AT UNIVERSITY

11. (SOUNDBITE) (English) LIBERIAN BOXER, GEORGE KPANGBAI, SAYING:

“I come to school to learn because at the end of the day, when I’m through with boxing when I have reached my peak, and decide to retire I just don’t want to be an empty headed boxer. I want to be somebody that can be capable of working as a manager in an entity, controlling working activities, controlling people, interacting with people, doing my own business, assisting people, and as well even counselling people as a boxer.”

12. VARIOUS OF SPORTS JOURNALIST, FOMBAH KANNEH IN OFFICE

13. (SOUNDBITE) (English) SPORTS JOURNALIST, FOMBAH KANNEH, SAYING:

“Boxing is a, is a great sport, it’s a fantastic sports. Through boxing, the Liberia, as a football nation we have George Weah right? And through boxing maybe we can produce the next Mohammed Ali, or errr Mike Tyson. Who knows? We have the talents here, we have the people here, but again, the support gotta be coming. You have to put your money where your mouth is or else you just be heading nowhere.”

14. GEORGE TRAINING ON THE STREET

END