



Flamboyant: Oneal 'Big Reds' Murray (right) is a regular on the British fight club scene
Pictures: Wil Batista

after work?

says Osei. 'We match them by weight and experience. Whatever the level, they have to be good fights.'

Not all of them are. The white-collar fights are scrappy and boring. One of the Thai-boxing coaches actually seems a little psychotic, screaming at his charge as his eyes nearly pop out of his head.

A fight between two women is clearly mismatched; the underling throws her towel into the ring to stop it. There are bloody noses and black eyes; the air is thick with testosterone and menace.

But there is also skill, respect and an almost balletic grace. And unintentional humour: former British heavyweight champion boxer Julian Francis (knocked out by Mike Tyson in 2000) unrobes to reveal a huge belly, then gets told to go away and put on his groin guard.

Each fighter gets their own musical fanfare (You've Got The Love by Florence & The Machine, Phat Planet by Leftfield); some strut on in silk robes à la dreadlocked Jamaican boxer Oneal 'Big Reds' Murray or, in the case of Sarah McCarthy, a blonde Thai boxer who, like Lawson, takes an Iska British title, a fancy Hawaiian-style fascinador and appliquéd satin shorts. Each fighter has their own

unofficial cheer squad in the form of family and friends and colleagues from representative gyms including Fulham Kickboxing in west London and Bad Company in Leeds. Paragon, based in Shoreditch, east London, has three competitors and the biggest cheer squad of all.

The gym is run by Lawson, who is my (patient, inspirational) kickboxing teacher. But while I still drop my hands way too

much and say 'ouch, that hurt' a lot, Paragon's elite fighters are the real deal – fighters such as Mark Walker, whose opponent shoots out of his corner, arms flailing, in an aggressive attack that is more street fight than Queensberry rules. 'Body, head, Mark!' we holler, followed by 'left jab!' By the second round, the normally mild-mannered Walker has dislocated his opponent's jaw. 'Ouch,' we say, wincing with tribal pleasure.

When I tell my friends what I did at the weekend, they're shocked. One of them likens me to the ladies who used to sit and knit by the guillotine during the French Revolution.

OK, fight nights aren't for everyone but it sure beats the hell out of a quiet evening in.

www.simplyfreddie.com for more details on Swagger. www.iska.org.uk or www.wakogb.moonfruit.com for details of fight nights across Britain



Stuart Lawson: A profile

The twin son of a British father and Spanish mother, Stuart Lawson was just 16 when he was involved in an unprovoked street fracas while on holiday in Galicia, Spain, with his older brother, Jonathan. Both were stabbed. The shocking experience prompted the then teenagers to take up martial arts; kickboxing seemed as good a combat system as any. Now, having won numerous championships in the course of a two-decade career, Lawson is considered one of the best kickboxers in the world.

'I just fell in love with it,' says the affable 37-year-old, who runs Paragon Gym in Shoreditch, east London, with Jonathan (his twin, Mark, oversees Springhealth



Kickboxing in King's Cross). 'It was an amazing way of channelling my energy and being creative at the same time.'

'The more identity, the less aggression' runs Paragon's tagline. While the Lawsons have produced

numerous black belts and British champions, several of whom are women (including Lawson's partner, chief instructor Hazel Gale), most of Paragon's punters come for stress relief, fitness and fun. In this basement dojo, with its mirrored wall and padded floor, its boxing ring and pulsating stereo, personal bests count.

'My family taught me to be humble,' says Lawson with a grin. 'So even though I'm being flamboyant in the ring, I will always bow and show respect to my opponent at the end.' So has he ever been forced to use his skills on the street? 'When I've had to. But it is always better to walk away.'

www.paragongym.co.uk

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