

# BOXING YOGA

Raging bull meets downward dog in a new class that promises to get you fit and flexible. **Cherry Casey** is first to the punch

**W**ith its mantra of 'Get FIT, not HIT', Total Boxer in London's Crouch End is my kind of boxing club. I'm here to try BoxingYoga – a class that promises to help create the complete, well-rounded boxer. The only problem is that I've never thrown a punch in my life...

## What Is It?

In 2012, former boxing coach Matt Garcia founded Total Boxer, which offers real boxing training without any actual fighting – perfect for those who like the idea of pummelling a punchbag, but have little desire to enter the ring. And around 60% of its attendees are women who, like me, probably don't fancy completing their Spring/Summer look with a black eye.

While his original fitness and skills classes were a success, Garcia felt

something more was needed to offer the complete training package. Soon, a yoga-shaped idea formed in his mind. He recognised how yoga can help boxers improve their strength, control and flexibility and so, after teaming up with contemporary dancer and yoga fanatic Kajza Ekberg, a new class was born. As Ekberg explains, 'If you look at boxers, their shoulders are often hunched over due to the stances they use.' BoxingYoga aims to counteract this by focusing on opening up the hip, shoulder and chest muscles and increasing movement range in the spine. It specifically uses moves from Ashtanga Vinyasa yoga, which focuses on fluid movement and coordination – all in a bid to create a better boxer *and* a better body.

But you don't have to be an aspiring Nicola Adams to attend. While the class was designed to introduce boxers to yoga, it draws a surprise crowd who want the reverse – rookies like me who have tried yoga before and want a novel twist on it or to try out a little sparring for the first time.

## What's Involved?

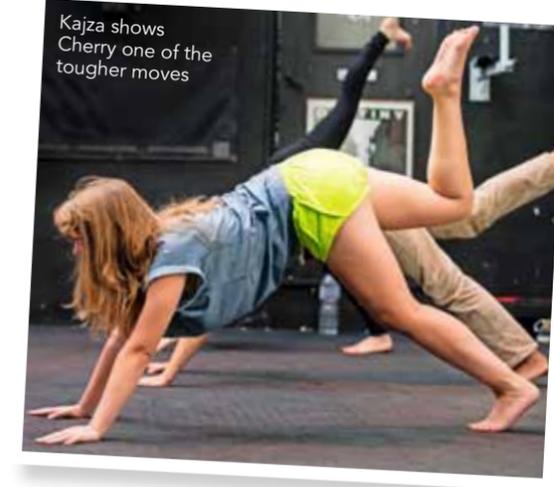
With the studio being just 900 square feet, class sizes never exceed 10 people. The class I attend has just three other women and one man, ranging from their 20s to 40s. As we take our places, I feel confident as I've been to quite a few yoga sessions over the years (albeit intermittently) and have always found them manageable. So when we start off with some familiar moves, such as the downward dog (where you get onto all fours on your hands and feet, with your bum sticking up in the air) and the plank (where you support your weight on your forearms and feet with your body straight as... well, a plank), I'm in my comfort zone.

However, there are less familiar arm movements thrown in. We're shown how to position our fists in front of our faces, with our elbows pointing to the floor and our forearms running parallel to each other. We then perform some slow jabs to the left and right

– twisting our spines around as we do. Next we move onto the cobra pose – laying on our fronts, lifting our chests off the ground to arch our backs upwards and stretching our arms out straight in

front of us. In this position, we clench our fists and, one at a time, bring them round to the side and behind us as far as we can, keeping our arms straight and our eyes on our fists.

I assume that all this fist-clenching is a gimmick to give the class a 'genuine' boxing feel, but Kajza explains that actually it's an important aspect of improving your skills. 'These moves are all about muscle memory. When bringing your fists up to your face, for instance, quite often people automatically stick their elbows out to the side and hold their wrists limp rather than firm.' These sorts of moves allow you to slowly and consciously practise your technique.



## Is It Challenging?

It seems that no sooner have we warmed up than we've moved onto some advanced positions that are new to me, such as one affectionately known as the 'awkward pose': arms outstretched, knees bent low and heels lifted up so the weight rests on the toes. Ouch! I'm soon getting a little more hot and bothered than I'd anticipated. In fact, half an hour into the class and I'm grateful for every time we move into the 'child's position', where I can tuck my legs underneath me, flop my arms forward and have a quick rest.

But before I can get too relaxed, we're in the downward dog position again for a killer last move (pictured above). First we have to stretch our right legs up towards the ceiling, opening our hips up as we do. It's manageable at first, but we're then asked to shift our weight

forward, so that our shoulders and hands are aligned, and slowly bend our leg back down while twisting our body around to the left, bringing our leg round and underneath our body, stretching it out to the left (Capiche? Don't worry, I was lost too). We hold it there before slowly moving it back up towards the ceiling before repeating the move twice more and then swapping to the other side. This move builds core strength, coordination and opens up the shoulders. But my body cannot – and will not – do it. I look at Kajza despairingly and she gives me a reassuring smile that says, 'Don't worry – this is a tricky one'.



## Does It Work?

By the end of the session, I am exhausted but elated. Whereas with other yoga classes I've often *believed* I've done my body some good, here I *really* feel I've had a proper workout. I'm eager to come back as I want to master the moves that got the better of me. And with the friendly atmosphere and range of ages and fitness levels, I felt completely at ease, even when I was struggling. So at ease, in fact, that I find myself eyeing up the punchbags. I've always wanted to experience the adrenaline that comes from boxing; now I might summon up the courage to try it. Fortunately, the first rule of this fight club isn't that you can't talk about it. So I'm going to be telling my friends... ♦

## BoxingYoga: THE FACTS

**What is it?** An hour-long yoga class that complements high-intensity boxing training by developing and stretching the muscles you use.

**Where can you try it?** At three venues in London, but there are plans for more classes. Sessions start at £8. Visit [boxingyoga.com](http://boxingyoga.com) for updates and a 30-minute workout video. A DVD will also be released in the summer.

**Who is it for?** Anyone with a moderate fitness level.

**How difficult is it?** Quite challenging. It's billed as 'hardcore' yoga.

**What are the benefits?** It develops strength and improves posture and coordination.

PHOTOGRAPHS: DARREN COOL, SCOPE BEAUTY