

# Throwing Punches

*Boxing instructor John O'Brien practices what he teaches*

**JOHN O'BRIEN** TEACHES his students the foundations of boxing, from landing a roundhouse to dodging a punch, as he demonstrates with Gary Chan (SAR'12).

WHEN BOXING TEACHER John O'Brien sends his students to the equipment room at the Fitness & Recreation Center for gloves and pads, they often notice a laminated news clip tacked to the door. The headline reads, "Hull Native Returns as National Boxing Champ," and the story recounts how O'Brien won the 201-pound National Masters Championship in 2006 and again in 2007.

"He's like a legit champ," says Sarah Dolaty (CGS'12), who took O'Brien's class last fall to help keep weight off. "When you realize the person teaching you has been to a high level of the sport, you should soak in everything from them."

O'Brien teaches one of FitRec's most popular classes. For close to 12 years now, he's taught two sections of boxing, each with 40 students, and both almost always fill up. The 63-year-old O'Brien says his students have no aspirations for the ring, but they are looking for one of the hardest, most thorough workouts any sport offers. With him, they get that and more. As they chisel their abdomens and pump their biceps, students learn the foundations of classic boxing from a fighter who's spent long hours in and around the ring.

During a morning class on FitRec's second floor, O'Brien lumbers among his students on stiff, bowed legs, his thick arms and big hands hanging loose at his side. The bridge of his long nose is crooked. His low growl of a voice has a touch of weariness when he intones "Beeeeauutiful" as his students jab at the air.

He drops into his boxing stance to demonstrate how to pivot, raising his fists close to his cheeks and tucking his elbows to his chest. With his right foot forward, he begins to circle, pushing off from the floor with his left foot. "Pretend that right foot is nailed to the floor," he says.



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Then he spins, as lightly as a ballerina, and the weight of his broad shoulders and solid torso seems suddenly to vanish.

O'Brien grew up in Cambridge, Mass. At 17, he stepped into the ring for his first amateur fight, against a kid in Gloucester "with a pretty good jab." He won in three rounds.

He became known as a puncher, a classic kind of boxer who stays in close to the other fighter's body. Think Sugar Ray Robinson or Oscar De La Hoya. He fought 50 fights overall, winning about 95 percent. Back in the 1970s, amateur fighters did not wear headgear, nor did officials stop fights for bleeding. Halfway into the third round in one fight, O'Brien's opponent smashed the bridge of his nose. He fought on with blood gushing out of his nostrils as his nose ballooned. He lost by a split decision.

"I liked the challenge of fighting, of setting a goal and preparing," he says. "The thing with boxing is the journey, and not the destination."

O'Brien says he considered going pro, but that would have meant giving up his union job as a carpenter and probably

**WEB EXTRA**  
Watch John O'Brien teach a boxing class at [bu.edu/bostonia](http://bu.edu/bostonia).

earning far less. So he fought as an amateur, eventually winning the Southern New England Golden Gloves in 1978, at 175 pounds. A year later, he walked away from the ring. Almost 30, he was getting too old, and with five kids, didn't have the time.

For the next 20 years, O'Brien stayed in shape with carpentry and karate, earning a black belt and winning titles. In 1995, he helped train a friend for a masters boxing tournament, then decided to fight himself.

"Boxing is like drugs," he says. "You miss it when you don't do it."

At BU, his students are mostly men, but there are a half dozen women.

"I thought boxing would be just punching, but it's a summation of all these little movements," says Dolaty. "It doesn't look like it, but the footwork, going around and around, is really tiring."

O'Brien teaches boxing from the feet up, he says, because even a powerhouse swing won't save a fighter who can't move well. He also does it to test his students and see if they can stick with the boring stuff, the shuffling and the endless crunches and one-armed push-ups—to see if they have guts.

"If they stick with that," O'Brien says, "I teach them how to punch."

And that is what he is doing now, running them through boxing's 14 punches. For safety reasons, the University doesn't allow the students to spar, so they practice hitting only with gloves and pads. Jabs, hooks, and uppercuts are thrown, and the sound of irregular thumps fills the air. O'Brien weaves among them, adjusting the way one holds his pads, pulling pairs closer together, showing a female student how to shoot her fist straight from her shoulder.

"He's a good teacher," says Sean Slattery (CAS'14). "He shows you what you need to do, rather than telling you what you're doing wrong."

Since he retired from carpentry in 1999, O'Brien spends six days a week boxing, either teaching or working out himself. When he's not at BU, where he also teaches kickboxing and the fitness class called Bootcamp, O'Brien can be found shadowboxing in the South Shore YMCA pool (the water is forgiving on knees stiff from years of carpentry), in Hanover, Mass., or at the Cyr-Farrell Boxing Gym in Quincy, Mass., teaching everyone from junior high school students to businessmen. The kids he teaches there (free) often come from difficult home situations and need the discipline and self-esteem boxing provides.

On a December afternoon at the Quincy gym, O'Brien dons headgear, an abdomen guard, and gloves, his knee braces showing below his shorts. After three rounds of three minutes each with four kids, O'Brien steps heavily through the ropes. He's breathing hard and sweat glistens on his face, chest, and arms.

"Who wants to fight?" he calls, his mouth guard muffling his words. "Who's coming in with the old guy?"

AMY SUTHERLAND

→ Kenneth Downey (COM'07) (from left), Athena Laines (COM'10), and Dev Lutchman at Alumni Weekend 2011.



CYDNEY SCOTT

## Pops on Tap for Alumni Weekend in September

*Performance will take place at Agganis Arena*



Alumni, family, and friends who attend Alumni Weekend 2012, September 21 to 23, will have the opportunity to see a first: the Boston Pops Esplanade Orchestra, led by conductor **Keith Lockhart (Hon.'04)** (top), performing at Agganis Arena on the Charles River Campus. The marquee event, which is open to the entire BU community, will take place on Saturday, September 22.

Alumni Weekend will have events for every taste and interest, including receptions, celebrations, school and college events, panel discussions, and ribbon-cutting ceremonies for **two new buildings at BU**: the six-story Center for Student Services in East Campus (center), which will house dining facilities and the relocated Center for Career Development and the Educational Resource Center, and the School of Medicine's student residence, at 815 Albany St. (bottom), a nine-story complex with 104 two-bedroom apartments, as well as retail and common space.

Visit [bu.edu/alumniweekend](http://bu.edu/alumniweekend) to learn more about all of the weekend's events.

