

# Why white-collar workers are paying \$799 to be punched in the face

*Plenty of 30-somethings and 40-somethings dream of stepping into a ring to weave, slip and hopefully land a direct hit.*

**Emma Connors** [[/by/emma-connors-h0yqhvh](#)] *South-East Asia correspondent*

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**S**ydney realtor Charles Touma is nursing a few bruises this week as he recovers from his first boxing bout. The 40-year-old has a new respect for professional fighters after an intensive training program that got him match fit, just, and he's learnt a bit about himself along the way.

The 40-year-old Touma has joined thousands of others who have survived a white-collar boxing program, a global movement that plucks professionals from their everyday lives and puts them in a boxing ring.





Charles Touma at a white-collar boxing event at Sydney's Royal Randwick Racecourse last week. **Nigel Owen**

Some develop an enduring passion for the sport, others discover it's an experience they don't want to repeat. Touma is among the latter. But he would still recommend it.

"It's a good way for the average Joe to put themselves in an environment where they are super uncomfortable," Touma says. Strangely enough, he found this combat sport has healing properties. "At the beginning of the training, I could tell some [people] there had inner demons. By fight night, they were so much more comfortable in their own skin."

There's something about boxing that draws people in. Advocates suggest it's a combination of the mental strength and the cardio fitness required, along with the concentration needed to master technique. A white-collar program is accessible to most people; just don't think it's going to be easy.

Touma says surviving three two-minute rounds at a Corporate Fighter black tie event at Sydney's Royal Randwick Racecourse last week was the hardest thing he's ever done.

"It was brutal. By round three my mind was saying, 'No'. It's confronting the pain while you defend and trying to throw a punch. It's doing something you would have thought was impossible. It pushed me through barriers I haven't been through before. I have no intention of fighting again, but I understand there is much more I can do than I thought previously."

White-collar boxing began in at Gleason's Gym in Brooklyn, New York in

the 1980s and, post-pandemic, its appeal is undimmed. Events are scheduled this year around the globe; the main requirement seems to be a sizeable population of professionals old enough to want a challenge beyond their everyday lives.

By the end of this year, 2500 people across Australia will have taken part in a Corporate Fighter program, says managing director Josh King.

“Everyone starts at the same level in that they have never fought before,” King says. “Some have never even put on a glove. Of course, some come on a lot quicker and some are fitter to start. It’s up to us to match them up with someone who has a similar ability.”

So why do people sign up, pay \$799 and undertake to deliver a table of 10 family and friends to watch them fight with a ringside ticket costing \$300 a person?

“For some it’s a bucket list thing; they’ve always wanted to get in the ring,” King says. Others have heard it’s a good way to get off the booze and to lose weight. Often the reason doesn’t emerge for some weeks into the program, sometimes not until after they fight.



Charles Touma's verdict on his boxing match: "It was brutal." Nigel Owen

“We have a female participant at the moment who’s unfortunately been the victim of domestic violence,” King says. “She’s raising money for other victims, and she thought this would be a way to gain courage and strength and maybe even protect herself in the future.

“Our trainers have to be compassionate. When you get punched in the face for the first time, you are taken to a whole different place.”

## ‘Thrill and excitement’

White-collar boxing has a following overseas, too. Australian chief information officer George Harrak had his first fight last June and plans to do it again. He had boxed as part of his off-season training during his footy days but rekindled his interest after he moved to Singapore, where he joined a boxing gym. In 2021, he moved to Dubai and was delighted to find his Singapore gym, Spartans Boxing Club, was running white-collar events in the country.

He’d always wanted to fight in front of a crowd and the event was also an opportunity to raise money for the family of a friend who had died in Singapore.

The 46-year-old says he had been to a few events and had always been a bit jealous of the participants.

“Watching the boxers walk out to the ring, you could see the thrill and excitement in their faces,” Harrak says.

That thrill was real, but Harrak discovered he’d underestimated how tough and time-consuming the training would be. With a busy day job getting a digital bank up and running, he found work and boxing pretty much took up three months of his life. He got a bit grumpy towards the end of the 12

weeks of training.

“There were a lot of nights when I’d come home after training and try to sleep, but couldn’t because I still had the adrenaline running through my body after six or seven rounds of sparring. It’s certainly not for everyone.”

For him, though, boxing gave back more than he put in. “I was a lot calmer at work. My ability to handle stress improved. The first day I walked into a boxing gym in Singapore was life-changing. I’ve found a sport I love, it keeps me fit and helps me in other parts of my life as well.”

And as for fight night, the gala event that night in June with a black tie crowd cheering him on? He will 100 per cent do it again, he says.

“When I got into the ring and had my first hit, I thought, ‘Yes! That’s what I’m here for.’ You do feel like a little bit of a rock star.”

## Community

Harrak is so convinced by the boxing gospel as practised by Spartans that he’s bought into the business, which was founded by Nazar Musa, an occasional boxer and full-time entrepreneur.

The Sudanese-born, UK-raised Musa stepped into a boxing gym for the first time in 2008. He was in Dubai, he was 40 kilograms overweight, and his doctor had told him he would become a diabetic unless he made some drastic changes.

“I started boxing on February 4 that year and my first fight was in the Habtoor Grand ballroom on June 6,” he says. “I’ve been addicted ever since.”

Harrak later moved to Singapore, did another white-collar event and also

had some amateur fights. After trying unsuccessfully to buy a boxing gym, he decided to start his own.

“I sold the business I was CEO of in Asia and my wife thought it wasn’t ideal for me to be sitting around the house.”

So Spartans was born. Musa teamed up with Australian expat Russell Harrison and the two set about building a franchise business. It was very different to both traditional “spit and sawdust” boxing gyms and “disco” boxing classes, which are short on technique.

Although Musa likes to fight, he says the Spartans focus is on community and making boxing accessible for all. The gyms are in residential neighbourhoods, not in business districts. They are family-friendly and encourage mastery of boxing skills with coach-led classes, videos and boxing bags with sensors that give a score at the end of each session.

Spartans is now looking to expand to Australia, where it plans to have its first gyms up and running by the third quarter, and to add a new white-collar event to the Australian calendar next year.

If its operations in Singapore, Dubai and Cambodia are any guide, most Spartans members in Australia will be there for fitness and fun. But between 2 per cent and 10 per cent will want to fight, be it white collar or in amateur competitions. They are an important part of the Spartans model. If you’re interested in boxing, chances are you will like training in a gym alongside real fighters.

Spartans has also teamed up with psychologists to develop programs that encompass both physical training sessions and therapy sessions.

Back in 2008, Musa lost weight by standing in front of a boxing bag twice a day, eating clean and giving up alcohol for three months. But that training didn’t address the reasons why he was overweight to start with – which he

didn't address the reasons why he was overweight to start with – which, he says, included the divorce he was going through at the time.

“So with Spartans Mind we can say, ‘Let’s talk about why you’re here in the first place,’” Musa explains.

“If I had had that in 2008, it might have saved me some of the crap I got into in 2009, 2010 and 2011,” he says cheerfully.



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### **Emma Connors**

*South-East Asia correspondent*

Emma Connors is the South-east Asia correspondent. She was editor of the Perspective and Review sections. *Connect with Emma on [Twitter](#). Email Emma at [emma.connors@afr.com](mailto:emma.connors@afr.com)*