

Sports

# Breaking stereotypes, chess and boxing create 'essence of excellence'

## Mix of chess and boxing played out in flesh and blood across the world

PARIS: Dripping with sweat, gasping for breath and desperately trying to refocus after fending off hooks and throwing uppercuts, Nikopol warily moves his bishop across the chessboard...

Once the literary creation of French artist Enki Bilal's illustrated books, chessboxing is now a reality, a mix of chess and boxing played out in flesh and, occasionally, blood across the world.

It combines the physical and the intellectual — and is growing in popularity. The sport, which makes its first fightnight appearance in the ring in France in November, has grown out of Nikopol's adventures in Bilal's 1992 book "Cold Equator", the final chapter in an epic trilogy in which the hero triumphs in a combat combining the strength of boxing and the intelligence of chess.

"At one point, I wanted my characters to confront each other in a spectacular way, in a gladiatorial way, just as sport does," Bilal told AFP.

"I wanted to find a sport that would epitomise the very essence of excellence in a human being, namely his supreme intelligence and his strength."

"What hit me straight away was chess. And boxing is important because it has a nobility. Behind the violence there is a whole philosophy of movement, of space. I immediately imagined them in a ring."

Ten years after Nikopol climbed through the ropes, Dutch performance artist Iepe Rubingh took the sport off the page and stuck it into a real ring.

In 2003, he organised the first fight — of which he was one of the two protagonists — and created the World Chess Boxing Organisation (WCBO) before promoting bouts around the world via the Intellectual Fight Club (IFC).

Today, there are 10 national federations and around

3,500 combatants, mainly in Germany, Britain and India and almost entirely men.

"It's the most complete sport," says Thomas Cazeneuve, a recruitment consultant who became France's first world champion in 2017.

"We work the body and the mind. It breaks the stereotypes, like that of the fighter who is a brute and that of the chess player who is a 'geek', not at all sporty, top of his class who will go on to be a computer expert."

The rules are straightforward enough. A contest breaks down into 11 rounds — six rounds of chess interspersed with five rounds of boxing. If it goes the distance, a match usually lasts around 45 minutes.

The chess is played under time controlled 'blitz' regulations with the fighters stripped to the waist and wearing a soundproofing helmet to cut out the noise of the crowd who bay and holler at every move on the board.

Cazeneuve grew up on chess as a kid before taking up kickboxing as a teenager. Now he has found the perfect outlet to blend his twin sports.

"You have to be able to switch from boxing to chess while remaining lucid so that the level of chess does not go down," he explains.

"We are used to playing chess in a room without noise, with a bottle of water, a bite to eat.

"But here we bleed, we hurt, we are out of breath, we don't know where we live and we have to play."

A victory, usually by knockout in the ring or checkmate on the board, wins and ends the entire contest. It is very rare that the decision has to go to the judges.

"It is a duel, no one gives an inch," says French federation president Guillaume Salanon who likens chessboxing to bullfighting.



PARIS: Chessboxers play a round of chess during a chessboxing training in Paris, on September 22, 2019. Chessboxing combines rounds of boxing with chess. It was born 18 years ago when its founder Iepe Rubingh brought to life a seemingly far-fetched idea from a French graphic novel, "Cold Equator" by French author Enki Bilal. —AFP

"It's a performance where you know something will happen, an artistic performance. It's completely mystical, powerful, moving, something you don't always have in sport." And with skateboarding and break dancing

being welcomed into the Olympic fold, is it too fanciful to imagine chessboxing taking off at Paris 2024 or Los Angeles 2028? Nikopol and his creator Enki Bilal would certainly approve. —AFP

## Hamilton wins in Russia to foil Ferrari renaissance

SOCHI: A euphoric Lewis Hamilton extended his world championship lead to 73 points yesterday when he rode his luck to claim a strategic victory for Mercedes in a roller-coaster Russian Grand Prix.

The defending five-time champion came home 3.829 seconds ahead of team-mate and nearest championship rival Valtteri Bottas as Mercedes took advantage of Ferrari's reliability and tactical problems by delivering a Silver Arrows one-two.

Having grabbed the lead from pole man Charles Leclerc on the opening lap, Sebastian Vettel ignored team orders to let him pass before he suffered a mechanical failure and stopped on lap 28. The resultant Safety Car period gifted Mercedes, who started on medium tyres while their rivals all used softs, a chance to extend their Sochi supremacy to six consecutive wins.

Leclerc came home a frustrated and disgruntled third, claiming he expected Vettel to repay him for his slip-stream in a race punctuated by two Safety Car

interventions and one use of the Virtual Safety Car.

Hamilton's win was his first since the Hungarian Grand Prix on August 4, his ninth in 16 outings this year and the 82nd of his career, lifting him 73 points clear at the top of the drivers' title race. He scored an additional point for fastest lap.

Red Bull's Max Verstappen finished fourth, having started ninth, ahead of team-mate Alex Albon, who had started from the pit lane. Carlos Sainz was sixth for McLaren ahead of Sergio Perez of Racing Point, Kevin Magnussen of Haas, Lando Norris in the second McLaren and Renault's Nico Hulkenberg.

"That's exactly what we needed," exclaimed a delighted Hamilton on the team radio following a flawless strategic performance by Mercedes. "It was an incredible job by all the team - not giving up. Keeping up with Ferrari was a hard task, but we kept pushing."

### CLEAN START

Leclerc remained poised, despite his disappointment. "At least we are consistent," he said. "It's a shame for the team not to have both of us up here... I will always trust the team, but our tactic was for me to give the slipstream, which I did - and then, well I need to speak to the team about that."

Leclerc had made a clean start, but behind him Vettel enjoyed a superb launch from third to pass Hamilton by the first corner and, after slip-streaming the Monegasque, taking the lead.



SOCHI: Winner Mercedes' British driver Lewis Hamilton celebrates on podium after the Formula One Russian Grand Prix at The Sochi Autodrom Circuit in Sochi yesterday. —AFP

Before the order settled, Ricciardo collided with Grosjean at Turn Four sending the Haas driver spinning into the barriers. A Safety Car was deployed and Grosjean retired. "We are looking into the swap further into the race," Ferrari told Leclerc, running second, suggesting they had agreed to repay him for punching through the air for his team-mate.

This was confirmed when Leclerc was told 'Sebastian will let you by next lap' - an order not welcomed by Vettel as he

stayed in front by 1.4 seconds with Hamilton adrift in third. Vettel said Leclerc, beaten in Singapore by a strategic decision in Vettel's favour, needed to close up. "I respected everything," answered Leclerc. "We will speak later, but now it is difficult to close the gap. Obviously." A revitalised Vettel was 3.6 seconds clear by lap 16 as Leclerc held off Hamilton until the team freed him to attack before he pitted for mediums on lap 23, Hamilton taking second. —AFP

## Kuwait shooters win medals at Asian Clay Target tourney

KUWAIT: President of Arab and Kuwait Shooting Federations Eng. Duaij Khalaf Al-Otaibi lauded the good results Kuwait shooters made during the 9th Asian Clay Target tournament being held in Almaty, Kazakhstan.

As Kuwait's Nasser Al-Miqliid won the gold medal in individual trap event, while Kazakh Victor Khasinov

won silver and Oman's Salem Al-Nasiri was third. The trap team of Nasser Al-Miqliid, Khalid Al-Mudhaf and Abdelrahman Al-Faihan won the silver medal, while the juniors Salah Al-Rashidi, Yousuf Al-Rashidi and Bader Al-Adwani won bronze.

Al-Otaibi praised the improved performance of Kuwait's shooters, specially the juniors who will be relied on in the future to continue the achievements in the name of our beloved Kuwait.

Al-Otaibi thanked HH the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah for his generous support for the development of the sport of shooting. He also thanked HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and all those who contributed to the sport of shooting.



## Vettel makes light of Sochi failure

SOCHI: Sebastian Vettel made light of claims that he ignored Ferrari team orders yesterday after an engine failure ended his hopes of winning the Russian Grand Prix. The four-time world champion, who made a blistering start and led for 27 laps, smiled when he was told he had been voted 'driver of the day' in a fan vote.

But, he said, he was disappointed Ferrari had failed to land a one-two triumph. "I don't know exactly what happened," said Vettel, when asked about a pre-race agreement he had with team-mate Charles Leclerc, who gave him a first lap slipstream to take the lead from third on the grid.

"I think we had an agreement. I spoke with Charles especially before the race. It was quite clear. Maybe I missed something?" "I'm sure we'll talk about it," he added with an enigmatic smile. "It's bitter for us today because we wanted to have a one-two and it's not the result we wanted. I don't want to share (details about our agreement) and I don't want to put the team in a bad light."

"We talked about a strategy to get past Lewis and I had a good start. I was in third and Charles was first - we raced and I think that's what we did until the pit stop when obviously I lost the lead and then the car broke down."

Vettel, whose victory in Singapore a week earlier was his first for 13 months, admitted: "It's bitter for me because this year has been tough. I unlocked the car - yesterday Charles was quickest and I can't be happy with that - and I was on the rhythm today and fastest to the stop."

"The positive thing for me is that the car is faster now. In raw pace, Mercedes have an edge, but this should give them a headache." —AFP

## Spence stops Porter by split decision in Staples Center slugfest

LOS ANGELES: Errol Spence successfully defended his IBF belt and seized the WBC title on Saturday, defeating Shawn Porter by a split decision in a welterweight unification fight. The 29-year-old Spence had to go the 12-round distance for the victory in a close slugfest with two belts on the line in one of the deepest divisions in boxing.

"I wanted to show everybody that I can sit there and bang with one of the roughest, toughest fighters in welterweight," said Spence. "I feel like I am the bigger, stronger and smarter welterweight."

The two fighters traded blows throughout, especially in close quarters where Spence did some of his best work in front of the crowd of 20,000 at the Staples Center. He recorded the only knockdown in the 11th round when he hit Porter with a vicious left that wobbled the former WBC champ. Porter didn't hit the canvas but his knees buckled and his left glove touched the ground, preventing him from going down.

But Spence (26-0, 21 KOs) failed to follow up with the knockout after Porter rose to his feet and said "let's go". Two judges had Spence winning 116-111 and the third gave it to Porter 115-112.

Spence was thought to be in line for a fight against Manny Pacquiao but the promoter Al Haymon poured cold water on that mega showdown by having officials in the ring announce Spence would fight Danny Garcia next.

Porter (30-3-1, 17 KOs) may have lost a close decision but he won the hearts of many boxing fans with his dogged, aggressive style. He would charge forward, at times trying to smother Spence with a barrage of blows. But it didn't always work as by the middle rounds, Spence figured out he could step aside and land short left hooks to Porter's head.

Some of the exchanges between the two were so wanton and the blows rapid-fire that the fighters landed simultaneously punches to each other's heads. Spence said Porter's mauling style made him uncomfortable at times.

"Porter is a rough fighter. I looked sloppy at times but give credit to Porter. He comes to fight," said Spence. On the undercard, David Benavidez regained the WBC super middleweight title with a ninth-round stoppage of fellow American Anthony Dirrell.

Benavidez, who was stripped of the crown after a positive drug test, was overpowering Dirrell when the champion's corner threw in the towel. The 22-year-old Benavidez improved to 22-0 with 19 knockouts. He was coming off a stoppage of J'Leon Love in March.

Dirrell, who was giving up 12 years to his rival, suffered a nasty cut over his right eye in the seventh round. By the time the fight was stopped, he could only see out of his left eye.

Dirrell took the vacant crown in February by beating Turkey's Avni Yildirim. He suffered just the second loss of his career to go with 33 wins and one draw. —AFP