



## SPORTS

# By Hook or by Rook

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BERLIN — Martin “Amok” Thomas is jabbing a right, but Frank “so-cool-he-doesn’t-need-a-nickname” Stoldt is as elusive as a ribbon in the wind. He can’t be hit.

*Time.*

The gloves come off, and the men hurry across the canvas to the chessboard. (You heard it right.) Amok took a couple of body shots, and he’s breathing hard, but he’d better focus. That Stoldt, though, everyone in the gym knows he’s this warrior-thinker, slamming the speed clock, cunningly moving his queen amid unraveling bandages and dripping sweat, daring Amok to leave him a sliver of opportunity.

*Time.*

Velcro rips. Amok slides back into his Everlast gloves, bites down on his mouthpiece, dances along the ropes. His king’s in trouble, and his punches couldn’t knock lint off a jacket. Stoldt floats toward him like a cloud of big hurt.

Such is the bewildering beauty of chessboxing, alternating rounds of four minutes of chess followed by two minutes of boxing. Victory is claimed in a number of ways, some of them tedious, but the most thrilling are by checkmate and knockout.

The sport’s godfather, Iepe “the Joker” Rubingh, believes that chessboxing, like that contest in which frostbitten Scandinavians ski around with rifles, is destined for the Olympics.

“It has enormous potential,” says the Joker, 31, a taut Dutchman with an undamaged chin and wire-rimmed glasses. “Chess and boxing are very different worlds. Chessboxers move around in both. It’s extremely demanding, but extremely rewarding. It’s all about control over your physical and mental being. The adrenalin rush in boxing must be lowered to concentrate on chess strategy.”

Some will snicker. The Joker knows this. But he is not deterred.

Former world heavyweight champion Lennox Lewis is a devoted chess player. Ukrainian Vitali Klitschko, another heavyweight champ who recently retired, has a keen intellect and knows what to do when a queen sidles toward his king.

That’s the kind of brawn and brain a clever marketing guy like the Joker thinks he can turn into success, not the novelty kind of success, but genuine prime-time, Caesars Palace spotlight success.

“I’d love to get them together,” the Joker says of Lewis and Klitschko. “What do you think they want -- \$30 million?”

Without marquee names, however, there is a potential drawback. Will people buy a beer and a hot dog and watch bare-chested smart guys in colorful satin shorts play chess? They will, the Joker believes, if the match coincides with the possibility of a knockout or spilled blood.

He has a question: “Is this story for the sports pages or another part of the newspaper?” Hard to tell, he is told.

The World Chess Boxing Organization, founded by the Joker and several business partners, held its first European tournament in Berlin in October. Five hundred fans showed up under dim lights as Bulgarian Tihomir “Tigertad” Titschko became the new champion.

Titschko peers over a chessboard like he’s trying to deconstruct the theory of relativity, and he hits like a big man who just met the guy who stole his girlfriend. He

defeated Andreas “D” Schneider, a German actor in dark trunks who punched well but succumbed in the ninth round to Titschko’s blistering chess attack, described as “the Dragon variation of the Sicilian defense.”

Chessboxers use words like “aesthetics” and “arduous.” They ponder performance art, science, philosophy; they study grids, angles and buried meanings in obscure books. They know about black holes and Taoism.

The rules might be considered simple: Eleven rounds, six of chess and five of boxing. The first round is always chess. “That’s because,” says the Joker, “if you go down in boxing there is no chess.” A one-minute pause between rounds allows opponents to slip on and off gloves and for the chessboard to be moved in and out of the ring. If all is equal on the chessboard and the boxing scorecard after the 11 rounds, according to the rules, “the opponent with the black pieces wins.”

Players are required to wear headphones during the chess part of the match. “This is so no one in the audience can yell out, ‘Hey, be careful of the knight on E-6,’ ” says the Joker, whose ring alias is a bit of history and a bit of Hollywood. “It’s part court jester, who in the old days was allowed to make fun of the king without getting punished. It’s a name responsible for entertainment. And everyone knows the Joker from ‘Batman.’ ”

The inspiration for chessboxing came to the Joker in 2003 after he glimpsed some dark magical realism in a comic by Enki Bilal, a Yugoslav-born artist living in Paris. “It’s a futuristic story, and there’s a guy watching TV,” says the Joker, “and on TV is a kind of chessboxing match.”

The Joker was raised in the Dutch port city of Rotterdam, the son of a carpenter and a librarian. “I always thought it was a nice combination,” he says, sitting in a candlelit Berlin cafe, sipping water before an evening practice at the world’s first chessboxing gym. “My mother brought home loads of books, and my father taught me how to work with my hands.”

He and his father would sit up until 4 a.m. watching boxing matches beamed in from the United States. He remembers Frank Bruno's ill-fated bout with a young and ferocious Mike Tyson in 1989. "I always wanted to box," says the Joker, "but my parents weren't fond of their son doing contact sports. I did cross-country skiing and table tennis. My dad taught me chess when I was around 6 or 8. I beat him after a few months. I like games where you have to think and go deeper."

The Joker went to college and majored in German cultural history. A painter, photographer and video artist, he followed the bohemians to Berlin in 1997. Six years later, he traveled west to Amsterdam and took on Luis the Lawyer in the world's first "official" chessboxing match.

These days, the Joker speaks of hybrids, of mixing things; he believes most people don't see all of life's available dimensions and narratives.

"We're too focused on defining sport in one way," he says. "Look at the old Olympics and the ancient Greeks. They had poets in the games, but in our society we want to divide things. I don't like borders. You try to tell a story through a game. Look at Muhammad Ali and George Foreman in the Rumble in the Jungle, or Bobby Fischer playing the Russians in chess." The Joker grabs his gear and crosses the street to the neighborhood gym.

He slips into the basement, past trophies and punching bags. This is his domain, his club, where he trains chessboxers and eyes potential stars. The guys are setting up chessboards and speed clocks; pieces are arranged, pawns skitter.

They're an interesting bunch, some with a thread of gray in their hair, others with barely a wrinkle on their face: There's Stoldt, a muscular Berlin cop and former amateur boxer. His wife was searching the Internet one day when she came upon chessboxing, convincing Frank it might be his calling. There is Victor Abraham, a classically trained baritone with close-cropped black hair and a mustache, who paints in the Bauhaus style. Jan Schulz, the club's trainer, can play two games of chess at once and still seem as if he could handle something else, like maybe physics. And

there's Amok, a website designer with good-sized fists and long arms snaking out from a tank top.

The chess games begin. Practice, of course, but intense. The speed clock clicking and clacking, and Schulz darting between chessboards. Stoldt is swirling and sliding his pieces. A few boards over, Abraham is studying the opponent's knight that's inching his way. But he takes a moment to talk.

He grew up in Leipzig, East Germany, during communist times. He boxed as a boy, and his grandfather led him to chess. He finished his classical music study in 1989, the year the Berlin Wall fell. He sang parts in Schubert and "West Side Story," but once, he says, "I had a cold and I kept singing because I needed the money, and my voice went bad. It's not tragic. Life is risks and I'm happy." He crushes a knight.

"This is a lot of fun," Abraham says. "I'm too old to be a professional boxer. But I'm not too old to be a chessboxer. You mix brain and power." The opponent slides a bishop to G-4. "Ahh, I have to be careful here," he says.

An hour's up. Chess pieces slide into boxes. Skipping ropes hum in the air. The Joker leads the club through stretching and push-ups. A few guys struggle, but not Stoldt. He's strong and compact, as well as dominating, like an upright piano in a tiny room. "It's important for me to have such a channel," he says. "I can be aggressive in a physical and mental way. Chess is not boring. One mistake and you lose a game. Boxing is the same way, very intense. You have to hit at the right place at the right time, and in chess you hit your opponent where he doesn't expect it." He slows his rope.

The Joker orders up a bout. Stoldt versus Amok.

Knights and bishops get a workout first. Then into the ring. Though Amok has a nice reach, Stoldt is slipping in jabs and Amok is tiring.

*Time.* Amok slides his queen to A-4, Stoldt drops a knight on G-3. Moves, counter moves, Stoldt takes a knight with a bishop. Gloves back on. Amok can't break through to hurt Stoldt. He's jabbing, but his arms are heavy, sweat's flowing. Gloves off. Amok goes to F-4 with a knight. Stoldt's pressuring. The queens wipe each other out. The ring again. Amok is sucking wind. Shoes scrape on canvas.

Smooth and quick, Stoldt goes for the kill. Knight to H-4. Amok's toast.

"I have to learn to box better," Amok says. "I knew Stoldt could knock me out if he wanted to. I have to be calmer. I get stressed when I get hit. I've got to concentrate, work on my chess. I think chess is the most important part of this sport. If you survive the ring, the better chess player wins."

The Joker pats Amok on the shoulder. Amok may be a contender one day. He's dedicated, smart and strong. The Joker has that same recurring thought: Wouldn't it be the ultimate marketing coup for chessboxing to arrange a match between Lewis and Klitschko?

He smiles at the possibility. Here comes another thought, this one about the potential growth of the sport: "Look at Russia, Ukraine. They're chessboxing nations and they don't even know it yet."



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