Calls for boxing to be banned after death

By Declan Warrington
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The death of British boxer Scott Westgarth has led to renewed calls for the sport to be banned.

Westgarth was 31 when he died in the early hours of Sunday morning, having fallen ill after outpointing Dec Spelman in Doncaster, in England’s north, on Saturday evening.

Boxer Scott Westgarth died in hospital after a bout on the weekend.

His death represents the third in British boxing in five years, and follows high-profile incidents in which the lives of Nick Blackwell and Eduard Gutknecht were threatened following their respective defeats by Chris Eubank jnr and George Groves.
It has also again cast a negative light on the sport, and contributed to brain injury charity Headway demanding it be outlawed.

"Boxing is a senseless waste of life and the time has come for it to be banned," the organisation's chief executive Peter McCabe said. "Scott Westgarth and many others before him should not have been allowed to lose their lives or sustain needless brain injuries through sanctioned acts of deliberate violence.

"We are repeatedly told that all professional fights have doctors at the ringside, but serious questions need to be asked about the medical provision that was available for Scott's fight.

"There is simply no way to make boxing safe, and to allow more lives to be lost in this way is unacceptable and completely irresponsible."

Robert Smith, general secretary of the British Boxing Board of Control, said on Monday: "I've spoken to the doctors and officials in charge and am satisfied with the procedures.

"It's a terrible thing that's happened. My condolences to all of his family."

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Kevin Mitchell

Scott Westgarth's death is being felt across the sport, but the predictable calls for boxing to be banned that will follow do not see the whole picture

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Another death, another rancorous debate. Scott Westgarth, a 31-year-old light-heavyweight who came to boxing late and left it too early, has died after winning the 10th fight of his short professional career. He will have no say in the agonised discussions to follow, except as collateral evidence.

Rolling bulletins on Monday morning - some of them brief mentions tacked on to the affairs of state and passing concern about the worsening weather - generated the first wave of familiar sadness and predictable controversy. The sport rose as one to laud a warrior, whether the defenders knew Westgarth well or not, because they understand the sacrifices and dangers of their calling better than the abolitionists they realised would soon be added to the noise.

Westgarth and Scunthorpe's Dec Spelman, the unbeaten 26-year-old favourite, each hit the floor in a hard, close contest. But the older man got up in the 10th to prevail against the odds, 95-92. The unclaimed prize was a shot at the English title, a minor belt that can lead to bigger
nights. Westgarth finished his ringside interview, later collapsed and was taken to hospital. He did not recover, joining more than 500 pugilists in the long history of the sport who have given up their lives in the ring.

Mike Towell was the last British boxer to die from boxing injuries, the day after losing to Dale Evans in Glasgow in September, 2016.

Saturday night’s promoter, Stefy Bull, described Westgarth as, “a young man doing a job he loves”. Very few don’t love it, even those who are damaged by it.

Michael Watson was sometimes seen ringside at fights in his wheelchair years after he emerged from his 1991 bout with Chris Eubank a shell of the fine fighter he once was; Spencer Oliver, who spent a week in a coma after his last fight, in 1998, is an articulate and passionate commentator still; Nick Blackwell, sadly, was so enchanted by the calling he came back from a coma induced by his dreadful experience against Chris Eubank’s son, Junior, in 2016, to spar again, to the alarm of everyone.

Meanwhile doctors and horrified citizens will rush to every proffered microphone to call for an end to what they regard as barbaric and pointless behaviour. They see the blood and bruises and exploitation - all of which are plainly on view. Their concerns should not be ignored. But they do not see beneath the skin of the fighters, who share their trepidation but not their perspective.

Bob Westerdale, who writes about boxing for the Sheffield Star, knew Westgarth better than most. “On a personal note,” he said in his paper on Monday, “I cannot get out of my mind the last words Scott spoke to me: Boxing is about taking risks and I will take them.”

Westerdale said of the “edginess” he detected in boxers: “It’s in their eyes. They possess an inner darkness needed to take themselves to a bad place - a hidden reserve required to take their opponent somewhere even worse. Out of the ring I never got that impression about Scott Westgarth, at all. Such was his lust for life, his brightness of personality and engaging chatter, he just didn’t seem like your normal boxer.”

Westgarth, a Geordie boxing out of Sheffield, had no amateur bouts and went straight to the pros, at 24. Some will say he might have been better off in one of his old jobs: a snowboard instructor who no doubt celebrated the bronze medal another free spirit, Billy Morgan, won at the Winter Olympics last week. Westgarth was also a chef at the Royal Victoria Holiday Inn in Sheffield. His gym mates at Glyn Rhodes’s Sheffield Boxing Centre in Hillsborough loved his sense of humour. He had no enemies in a sport that accommodates much resentment.

Curtis Woodhouse, the former footballer whose main event on Saturday night, against John Wayne Hibbert, an eliminator for the Commonwealth light-welterweight title, was cancelled along with the rest of the show, wonders about his future in the sport.

“My condolences and thoughts go out to Scott’s family, friends and all those who knew him, it’s so heart-breaking,” Woodhouse told the Hull Daily Mail. “You forget sometimes how dangerous a sport this is. Events like this leave you questioning whether you want to continue in the sport. I’m sure there will be a lot of soul searching for everyone.”

Bull, whose own last bout, in 2010 was against Woodhouse, joined the queue on social media to reiterate his condolences. “God bless @scottwestgarth 2 promote a Boxing show and a young man doing a job he loves losing his life I have no words RIP lad thoughts go out 2 yr family and yr team it’s been the hardest few days I’ve had to endure no idea what 2 do moving forward.”

But life does move forward. On BT Sport on Monday morning, a three-hour tribute to Muhammad Ali celebrated the greatest heavyweight of them all. There was social media chat about Callum Smith’s win over the Dutchman Nieky Holzken in Nuremberg on Saturday night and how the Liverpudlian might fare against George Groves when they meet in London in the summer. An email reported the Rio Olympian Anthony Fowler would return to the ring on the undercard of Dillian Whyte’s heavyweight fight against Lucas Browne at the end of March.

A few of us joined Whyte in London in the afternoon. It was not a joyous occasion. Everyone spared time to reflect on Westgarth’s death – especially the fighters present. But they will all move on.

On Saturday another Sheffield boxer, Kell Brook, will make his high-profile comeback after two defeats in world title fights in which he injured both eye sockets. He has had doubts about risking his sight. Now he must put those concerns aside. It is what Westgarth did. It is what they all do.

A GoFundMe page has been set up to support Scott’s family

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