

After taking up boxing at 8 years old, Amir 'King' Khan quickly showed promise in the sport, winning a number of youth tournaments in his early teens. He was propelled into the limelight as a 17-year-old when he won a silver medal at the Athens Olympic Games in 2004. He was Great Britain's only boxer at the games and remains the nation's youngest boxer to win a medal.

He turned professional not long after the Olympics, but not before getting revenge on the man who beat him to gold, Mario Kindelan, who he defeated in his final fight as an amateur.

Khan's famed speed which had served him so well in the amateur game, made him a skilled and entertaining professional fighter.

His professional career has seen him notch wins over nine world champions, while himself claiming two world titles. His victory over Andreas Kotelnik in 2009 saw him become the third youngest Brit ever to win a world title, at the age of 22. He defended the title five times over 2 years, adding the IBF Light Welterweight title after beating Zab Judah in 2011.

A devoted father and family man, Khan tells us that perhaps the most important part of his sport is the health of boxers.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

2011

Unified the IBF and WBA Light Welterweight titles by beating Zab Judah

2009

Won the WBA Light Welterweight world title, beating Andreas Kotelnik

2009

Beat former seven-time world champion Antonio Barrera

2005

Beat David Bailey in his first professional fight

2005

Beat Mario Kindelan in the final match of his amateur career

2004

Olympic silver medal at the Athens 2004 Games

2004

Won the Strandja Cup in Bulgaria to qualify for the Olympic Games

2004

Gold Medal at the World Junior Championships

2004

Gold medal at the European Student Championships

2003

Won gold at the Amateur Athletics Union Junior Olympic Games

You were just 17 years old when you won a silver medal at the Olympics, you were also the only boxer representing team GB, did you feel a lot of pressure at those games? And how did you deal with that pressure?

I did feel a lot of pressure, being the only fighter from the UK as well as one of the youngest Olympians at those games. The pressure was there because I wanted to prove to people how good I was. They didn't want to send me at first because they said I was too young, so I wanted to prove to the selectors and the coaches that I was the best fighter in the UK and one of the best in the world and that I was good enough to be there.



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You also turned professional as a teenager, was it daunting to go up against older, more experienced fighters?

Yes, it was very tough. It's not easy to fight these guys, these tough men. I would hit them and they wouldn't go down. I could see the difference of being a man and fully matured, the power was totally different and the pressure they could put me under during a fight. It was totally different to fighting a guy my own age, these men were stronger than me, they could physically push me back, I didn't even have facial hair at that time, I was a little boy. When I started fighting the seniors, I had to completely change my tactics, because they were stronger than me. I had the speed and the movement, so

I had to hit them with speed, then move because if I stood there and traded with them, they would physically overpower me.

Can you outline the differences between amateur and professional boxing in terms of the physical demands?

Professional fights are 12 rounds, compared to amateur fights, which are three rounds. The professional bouts tend to be a bit slower because they are longer, but they are more technical – you have to pick the right shots at the right time. The gloves are a little smaller for the professionals, so when you get hit with a good shot, it is going to hurt. And one punch can change a fight, you could be



Image left: Amir Khan lands a punch on Chris Algieri during their Welterweight bout in New York in May 2015.

Image right: Khan hits Devon Alexander during his 12-round unanimous decision win in Las Vegas in December 2013.

Image below: Amir Khan celebrates after defeating Andreas Kotelnik to become the WBA Light Welterweight Champion in July 2009 in Manchester.

winning a fight until the last round and then get knocked out by one good punch. That's the thing about the professional game, it's a tough and ruthless sport. To win professional fights you need more strength, power and aggression, whereas in amateur boxing you can use skill and movement to score points.

What impact has sports science and medicine had on your career?

It's had a big impact on my career. I like to read, I like to see what new methods are available out there. I see the body like a car, you have to take care of it in the right way, put the right fuel into it, its about being one step ahead. You need to have a lot of energy when you train, boxers train so hard and with such intensity that if we can add just one or two percent to our strength and conditioning it can only make you a better fighter. I always want to train harder than my opponents and be one step ahead of them and having the right sports science and medical support can help you do that.

Has this ever led you to change your training methods?

It has yes. It helps you to realise things like the fact you don't have to train every day. You can have days off as well to recover and this will actually help make you stronger. Sports science also helps with your mental toughness and how you prepare psychologically for a fight.

When you are in training, how often are you in contact with the medical staff?

More or less every day. I usually always have one of the doctors or medical team with me just to make sure everything is ok. They also run regular tests on me. And if I have any aches or pains, they are

always on hand. I think its always good to have someone from your medical team with you, especially in a sport like boxing with a high number of injuries and lots of activities which can cause pain.

Professional boxing requires both strength and endurance, how do you train for each of these and how much time do you spend training each?

Usually my strength and conditioning and fitness coaches focus on conditioning first, which involves swimming, running, hill sprints, circuit training, sprinting on the track and a small amount of weightlifting, with just a little bit of boxing here and there. Then as we get closer to a fight I will go to a training camp which is more focused on boxing, that's when I train technique and fighting style and we develop the game plan for winning a fight. Both are very important, you do need to be fit as well as strong, but your boxing needs to be on point too.



If you don't bring your weight down gradually, you can shock the body and make yourself sick or increase the risk of injury



How many hours do you train per week in the build up to a fight?

It's probably about 32 to 36 hours per week training, with one day off, its roughly 6 hours a day – 3 in the morning, 3 in the evening, so there is a long rest period to recover and eat in between-6 days per week.

When you are moving between weight categories, how do you go about altering your bodyweight?

I normally train up to the weight. Some fighters eat up to the weight, I feel like that is cheating yourself a little bit. I like to train and add muscle mass, that way I know I'm going to be very strong when fighting in that category. This is where sports science comes in again, advising the best training methods to build muscle, as well as the supplements and diet required. At Aspeta we measured muscle and fat mass using DEXA body scans so we can target where to add or lose weight. I think it's an amazing tool for boxers. It gives you a great understanding of your body and your training progress.

How important is nutrition for a boxer? Do you follow a set diet?

It's very important for boxers, because we train so hard. You can't just put anything into your body and train at that level, because you won't be training to the best of your ability. Putting the right fuel in your body lets you train at your maximum.

A boxer's weight can change quite significantly between a weigh-in and the actual fight, can you tell us about the methods used to achieve this and how it can affect your performance?



If you get it wrong it can really affect your performance. A lot of people get it wrong because they dehydrate themselves so much and so quickly to make the weight. If you don't bring your weight down gradually you can shock the body and make yourself sick or increase the risk of injury. It needs to be done gradually through training and diet so you can stay safely hydrated.

How do you prepare yourself mentally before a fight?

I like to sit down before a fight and think over the training I've done and the game plan for that fight. It's really just everything that I've been doing every day, learning about my opponent and how to go about beating him and putting this in my mind, refreshing it.

Have you ever worked with a sports psychologist?

I have, a long, long time ago. I recognise the benefits that a psychologist can bring, but it really depends on the athlete. I find it easy to motivate myself and push myself very hard, but equally when I need a rest, I know how to turn off as well. I wouldn't rule out using a sports psychologist again though.

A fight can be ended by the ringside doctor if they feel a fighter isn't fit to continue. Although it must be disappointing for any athlete, do boxers accept this as a necessary measure for safety in the sport? Has one of your fights ever been ended by a ringside doctor?

It's never happened to me, I've never been stopped by the doctor, but I think it's a vital thing to have doctors and paramedics at the arena. At the end of the day, boxing is a sport, it's not war. Boxers

are athletes, prizefighters, they shouldn't be getting seriously hurt by staying in a fight to show how macho they are – there is always another day, there will always be another fight. However, boxers are also very tough and they are proud, most will take a beating and stay in a fight until the last round regardless and with the amount of adrenaline in your system, you might not even feel particularly hurt, so the doctor is needed to decide when that becomes unsafe. Boxers may get upset with the doctor or referee for stopping a fight, but they are only looking out for the fighters' health.

How do you recover after a fight?

I like to take an ice bath straight after a fight. I always go to the hospital and get a medical check-up. After that I like to just relax and spend time with my family.

Do you find it difficult to sleep after a fight?

A fight night usually ends up being a very late night as it is, I usually spend some time with my friends and family once everything else is done. By the time I get to bed I'm normally very tired.

Have you ever had an injury that's threatened your career?

I had hand problems quite a long time ago. But I don't think I've had any career-threatening injuries. I've been lucky to have some very good medical advice during my career.



Image far above: A 17-year-old Khan poses with his medal after winning silver in the men's boxing 60 kg event at the Athens 2004 Olympic Games.

Image above: Amir Khan forces opponent Luis Collazo onto the ropes during the 10th round of the pair's Welterweight match in Las Vegas, May 2014. Khan won by a unanimous points decision.

What are the worst injuries for a boxer?

Obviously the most serious risk is brain damage. There is a life after boxing and you want to be safe in that sense. There have been many great fighters with a lot of heart and hugely entertaining style, but now they struggle to speak, they can't remember things and that's because of boxing, that's the risk of taking too many punches. That's why the medical teams are so important. Aside from that, injuries to your hands; your hands are your tools in this sport.

Concussion is a hot topic at the moment not just in boxing, but in several sports, including rugby and American football. Do you have concerns about the effects your boxing career could have on your body by the time you retire?

I love boxing, it's in my blood. But I'm a family man, I have a little girl and I'm married. I want to be healthy for my family. I want to be able to pick my daughter up from school, I want to be able to take them on holiday. So yes, it does give me concerns, but I think the important thing is to leave boxing behind at the right time. I want to retire from boxing, I don't want boxing to retire me. Many of the best fighters in the world have retired because they had to, medically, but I will retire before it gets to that stage.

Is there a way to balance safety and the inherently violent nature of the sport?

The best way to make boxing safe is close medical supervision. More boxers need to be doing these regular medical check-ups, if they don't, they may regret it later in life.

What is your view on amateur boxing getting rid of head guards, would you have preferred to fight as an amateur with or without a head guard?

I don't think head guards really help. When you have a head guard on you are more likely to put your head in, lean on your opponent and even take more punches to the head, because you know you have protection and you won't get cut. But if you don't have a head guard on, you won't leave your head as exposed to your opponent, you won't let him punch you in the head, because you know you're probably going to get hurt or knocked out. Getting rid of the head guard makes boxers move more and avoid punches, it makes you a better defensive fighter.

Boxing is a sport where you don't want to show any weakness to your opponent. In addition to this, fights can take a long time to set up and be worth huge amounts of money. Do these things put pressure on boxers to fight when they are injured or not fully fit?

It definitely can. Boxing pays good money, but some fighters make the mistake of spending like crazy, especially if they know they will have money coming in from a fight. Fighters can reach the end of their career with little money and then feel pressured to return to the ring after some time out or agree to fights they shouldn't, in order to make money. That's when injuries happen, that's when they get caught off guard. Their reactions might not be what they once were, they may have put weight on, their muscle memory may have started to fade.

Could there be a role for healthcare professionals in that respect, to step in and cancel a fight on medical grounds?

I think there could be rules like that, which may help. For example, the medical bodies should be able to say to older fighters, 'you've been without of fight for a couple of years, we don't think it's safe for you to get back in the ring'. Doctors should be allowed to intervene in these cases, because people are risking their lives. There's other ways of making money besides stepping into a boxing ring.

Women's boxing was a new addition at the 2012 Olympic Games, would you encourage your daughter to take up boxing?

Never! She loves it and she is always running around the house punching me. But I think boxing is the hardest sport in the world and you are always only one punch away from getting seriously hurt. It wouldn't be any different if I had a son, I wouldn't ever encourage my children to take up boxing.



Image: Khan in action against Julio Diaz in Sheffield, April 2013. A unanimous points decision went in Khan's favour after 12 rounds.

Jake Bambrough