

# THE LEDE



## Mind Game

An unusual sport's rapid growth  
in India / **Sport**

/ **SWATI SANYAL TARAFDAR**

On a Sunday morning in late December, inside a small gym room in a modest three-storey building in Kolkata, Jayashree Adhikary, an eleventh-grade student, moved around briskly in red boxing headgear. She rained a flurry of punches on her opponent, Taniya Das, who looked small and timid in comparison. Taniya dodged and ducked to avoid getting hit, waiting for the right moment to launch a counter-attack. Just as her moment came, and she struck, Jayashree got behind Taniya and folded herself on her opponent's back, trying to whirl her over. The referee's whistle blew right at this moment, indicating the end of the fourth round.

In a moment, coaches and juniors rushed to the players with water to keep them hydrated, helped them take off their boxing gear and get into robes, and put on zero-noise headphones. In less than a minute, the players rushed to a tidy corner of the gym, where a chessboard with a game in progress was waiting. Another indication came from the referee, and the fifth round began. Jayashree, who was playing white, struggled to remember what moves she had played in the previous round of chess. She had only 20 seconds to make a move, else she would be penalised for wasting time.

Taniya proved smarter on the chessboard. She made some quick moves using a couple of pawns and a knight, and soon, Jayashree was cornered. Jayashree was taking more time with her moves, clearly anxious to get back into the boxing ring for the next round, where she must have been hoping to knock Taniya out. Just before the allot-

ted three minutes for this round were over, Taniya checkmated Jayashree. As the practice match came to an end, other players, who were watching the two battle it out, applauded the chess boxers.

The institute is run by Montu Das, a fourth-degree black belt in kick-boxing and the founder and president of the Chess Boxing Organisation of India, or CBOI—the Indian governing body of a sport that combines chess with boxing. In only about five years since he introduced the sport to India, Das has managed to amass a surprisingly large following for the sport in the country. Today, there are around 1,000 registered chess boxers in India across more than 13 states.

Chess boxing was invented in 2003 by the Dutch artist Iepe Rubingh, who was inspired by an imaginary sport illustrated in a graphic novel by the French cartoonist Enki Bilal, in 1992. Rubingh added timed bouts to make the sport more competitive and entertaining. Once he found a few others equally intrigued by the sport, he conducted the first ever World Chess Boxing Championship, in 2003, in front of 1,000 spectators in Amsterdam. Rubingh played against a friend and won the only match of the championship. The sport grew popular through word-of-mouth, and clubs sprouted across Europe.

Das, a seasoned martial-arts teacher by then, stumbled into chess boxing in 2011, while surfing the internet for information on kick-boxing. “My first martial-arts guru, Master Anup Kumar De, used to talk about the health benefits of playing a game of intense mental stimulation like chess right after an

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intensive bout of physical wrestling or boxing,” he told me at the gym. “Over the years, I had believed in his line of thinking, and when I saw that someone had actually devised a sport based on a similar arrangement, I had to explore and participate in it in the best possible way. Over the next one year, I studied the game.”

Das contacted Rubingh, who told him about the potential opportunities that can arise from the sport. That same year, they opened the CBOI. “Ever since,” Das told me, “I have been conducting camps to spread word about the sport, training talented youngsters, organising competitions, and writing to the youth and sports department of the union ministry, pleading them to recognise chess boxing in India so that it draws more players and patrons.”

Das's efforts have borne fruit. There are 13 states in India that play chess boxing seriously, with West Bengal, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu being the most prominent. Das, who is also the vice president of the World Chess Boxing Organisation, of which Rubingh is President, told me there is interest in other states as well, many of whom are on their way to setting up regional chapters. Das has managed to bring the World Chess Boxing Championship to Kolkata, where it will be held



MIGUEL VILLAGRAN / AP PHOTO

**The Dutch artist Iepe Rubingh invented chess boxing in 2003, inspired by an imaginary sport illustrated in a 1992 graphic novel by the French cartoonist Enki Bilal.**

between 12 April and 15 April this year. India's current national champions will take part in the tournament. Of the 1,000 registered chess boxers in India, about one third are girls. Das said that the surge in interest among girls is a Kolkata phenomenon, where parents increasingly want girls to acquire self-defence skills.

A single chess-boxing match comprises 11 rounds—six rounds of chess that alternate with five rounds of boxing. Each bout of chess and boxing runs for three minutes each, followed by a minute to change gear and get ready. The match continues until one knocks out or checkmates the other. After 11 rounds, a winner is decided on the basis of boxing points. If there's a tie,

the player with black pieces is declared the winner. Players can lose points for wasting time, and can even lose a match for repeated violations.

"Everyone tries to win the match in the first round, which is of chess," Shailesh Tripathi, India's most successful chess boxer, who also works as a coach in Maharashtra, told me on the phone. "The players are in their best form then, no sweat, no challenge. When the match moves to the second round, which is of boxing, one is still fresh and confident. After three minutes of boxing, your adrenaline starts pumping, your heart rate shoots up, as your heart works twice as hard to provide oxygen-rich blood to the muscles. As a result, oxygen supply to the brain

goes down, and a player can experience temporary memory loss and or irrational behaviour." He said this is similar to what people experience in states of intense anger and excitement. "And then, amid all these physical challenges, one has to sit and play a round of chess," Tripathi said.

Tripathi claimed that when one has played chess boxing for some time, the brain gets conditioned to calm down after every bout. "The mental workout of chess, immediately followed by boxing, forces the heart to increase blood supply to the brain," he said. "You are able to gain control over your own mind and emotions, and become a better person simply by enhancing your ability to control and channelise your anger and emotional turbulences."

In January, I spoke to Rubingh over email, who said he had big plans for Indian players who do well at the World Chess Boxing Championship in Kolkata. "We will select the best fighters from India to fight in the professional league in Europe," he wrote, adding that the plan is to bring more professional events to India.

"The Chess Boxing Organisation of India was one of the very first chess-boxing organisations in the world and by now the biggest," he wrote. "This means they have a fairly good chance of becoming one of the leading nations in this sport."

I asked Das how far he thinks the sport can go. Could it ever make it to the Olympics? "Who worries about Olympics when our players are taken care of really well, are able to play great matches, and earn a fantastic living?" he said. "That's what I want to see for my students in chess boxing." ■