Fighting back: how adaptive boxing changed one Geelong man's life

Phill Hulands with Australian boxer Jeff Fenech on the day of the Australian Adaptive Boxing Council (AABC) Boxing Championships. Photo: supplied.

BOXING

TAHLIA SINCLAIR

Four years ago, champion adaptive boxer Phillip Hulands was feeling lost.

The Geelong 40-year-old had been living with a rare autoimmune disease that affected his mobility for nearly two decades and had turned to alcohol and cigarettes while grappling with depression.

He was not the same man that recently became the first Australian Adaptive Boxing Council (AABC) Boxing Champion.

He now barely recognises the man who first arrived at Complete Health Geelong, where he met the coach who would help change his life.

"I was always smoking cigarettes and I was bad on the alcohol," he said. "I was rocking up [at the gym] smelling of alcohol. It wasn't very good or healthy.

"A fair bit of depression gone out of me and I am so glad I've got coach [Harrison] who actually pulled me out of that depression.

"He let me see the bright light that we all deserve to see."

Hulands first took up boxing afte a friend recommended the sport and helped connect him with Harrison at the trauma-informed community gym.

What began as a way to improve his fitness and build friendships soon became something bigger, with Hulands determined to test himself in the ring.

But finding an opponent proved fa more difficult than they had anticipated.

Proposed bouts were repeatedly cancelled, leaving the pair searching for other adaptive boxers without a central organisation to connect athletes and arrange match-ups.

"We were cold-calling gyms," he said. "We were talking to people we saw in wheelchairs in the street. We'd stop them and talk to them [about adaptive boxing].

Adaptive boxing is growing in popularity across Australia. Photo: supplied.

"We'd become pests, essentially."

Eventually, footage of an adaptive boxing exhibition attracted attention from people acros looking for the same opportunity.

Slowly, they established a network of adaptive boxe through chance meetings and messages on social media.

fights were postp fall through.

"In so many ways it was disappointing, but it made me feel stronger," Hulands said.

"I kept thinking I'm going to have my fight. I'm going to push and keep pushing forwards, don't go backwards."

Navigating those setbacks became just as important as the physical training itself.

Alongside Harrison, Hulands was able to develop positive coping mechanisms as they continued the journey towards the national championship.

"We never said 'You can't do this'," Harrison said.

"When we had fights fall through, it was devastating for Phill, but it was important to feel that. We'd be upset about it for a week and after that we get back to it, because we're fighters. that's what fighters do."

After four years of training, Hul became the first Australian Adapti Boxing Council (AABC) Boxing Champion after defeating Eddie Buttimore.

For a man who had spent years feeling defined by his condition, f championship meant more than just receiving a belt.

"Everywhere else that I find out about my illness, they say I am un incapable. I've always been told that," Hulands said.

"Now I'm holding the Australian adaptive boxing belt to my name. No other Australian has ever held that to his name."

Hulands credited Harrison's continued belief in him as a driving force behind his progress.

"No matter what falls down, he's always there to say, 'Let's go. Let's do this'," he said.

Now, with the recently founded Australian Adapti cil (AABC), Harrison at adaptive boxing will continue to grow.

After struggling find the adaptive boxi ABC provides a much-needed centralised organisation for athletes and coaches to link into.

"The issue isn't that there's no one in wheelchairs who wants to box," Harrison said.

"The issue is that there's nowhere for people to go."

With its first na ship now complete, the council is looking towards an international trip in 2027, with a team of Australian adaptive boxers, including Hulands, hoping to compete against athletes associated with the United Adaptive Boxing Council in the United States.

The trip would provide an opportunity to test themselves internationally while building connections with the wider adaptive boxing community.

To learn more abou **aabcboxing.com** and to support ABBC's athletes to next year visit **gofund.me/0bb858e0e**

Phill Hulands celebrates his title win with adaptive boxer Dallas Lane Bryson, coach Luke Harrison and Australian boxer Jeff Fenech. Photo: supplied.

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