

How Islington's boxers can help Sri Lankans to come together

BOXING

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For the sceptics who associate boxing with violence, it might be worth hearing what Mohan Samarasinhe has to say.

Mohan, a Sri Lankan expat who has lived in London for over 40 years, is heavily involved with charity campaigns which help underprivileged children in his homeland to improve their prospects.

One of the charities he established is SPICE (Speaking, Promoting and Involving Children in English), a programme to train English teachers in his native country.

Initiatives of that kind have become even more essential as Sri Lanka recovers from the chaos of the civil war that plagued the island for more than a quarter of a century.

Like education, sport can act as a powerful unifying force – and that is why Mohan has forged a strong partnership with Islington BC to help develop boxing among Sri Lanka's youngsters.

Last year Islington coaches Lenny Hagland and Barry Healey led a training programme for students at Narandeniya National School in the small town of Kamburupitiya.

And preparations are now being finalised for a return trip to Sri Lanka next month, with Hagland heading a party of six from the

Hazellville Road gym. Mohan told the *Gazette*: "We focused on teaching English because, as much as it is a world language and language of education, it is also a very good link for the two sides of Sri Lanka.

"Another medium is English through sport, which I'm very keen to help develop. I believe in it so much – I played a lot of sports and I have friends from different communities all over Sri Lanka because of that.

"I think martial arts are very good for discipline and I'd like to strengthen the relationship between the UK and Sri Lanka and also to try and help the poor people who were affected by years of civil war.

"There are difficulties because of the culture in some of the villages, but I think we were accepted very well and so we want to follow that up with another programme.

"We're taking some boxers [from Islington] there and hopefully one day we can bring some of the best ones over here from Sri Lanka. I'd like to make this a regular thing."

Mohan, who was privately educated at St Thomas' College, Mount Lavinia, represented his country at international level in hockey, as well as playing rugby, cricket and basketball.

Originally working as a tea planter, he maintained strong links with his homeland after emigrating and helped to found charities including the Ruhuna Children Development Trust and We Are One Sri Lanka.



■ Mohan Samarasinhe (right) and Islington Boxing Club's Lenny Hagland have linked up again to help coach youngsters in Sri Lanka in February. Picture: REGGIE HAGLAND

And it was a visit to the Narandeniya school, as part of the English teaching programme, that indirectly led him to Islington's door.

Mohan explained: "When I went to the school, I found they were good at boxing – it was mainly girls at that time.

"They were doing very well but they didn't have a boxing ring and the gloves they were using were old and frayed, so I gave them money to buy new gloves and headguards.

"When I came back to the UK I looked up boxing clubs in north London and the first one that came up was Islington, so I rang up and spoke to Lenny.

"He told me they were holding onto gloves for someone else who hadn't come for them, so I could have them if I wanted. I met Lenny and he was impressed with what he saw, so I tried my luck and asked whether he'd be willing to go to Sri Lanka."

Mohan, who returns to Sri Lanka around three times a year, has gained

sponsorship from Dian Gomes – the chairman of multi-national company Hela Clothing and also a coach and promoter, who is regarded as the doyen of boxing in the country.

The Islington contingent which is heading to Sri Lanka in February – which includes Amy Andrew, Amy Pa, Scott and Troy Smart and DJ Moore – will also spend some time with students at Mohan's old school.

Most of the Islington boxers are already involved in coaching the club's younger members and Hagland hopes they will also benefit from the 13-day trip to Sri Lanka.

He said: "We'll try and teach our methods, but also learn from theirs and we'll have to adapt to the conditions out there – it's about 30 degrees in February."

"There's no punchbags or anything like that, so our lot will have to make do and that will make them better coaches. The respect you get from the children there also makes it worthwhile – it just overwhelms you."

Bourne three to make sure Admiral enter 2017 on a high

MEN'S FOOTBALL

ISLINGTON MIDWEEK LEAGUE
Islington Admiral Utd 7
Cricklewood Wanderers U21s 0

Chris Bourne maintained his run of form with a second-half hat-trick to ensure that Admiral ended 2016 on a high note by thrashing Cricklewood.

Bourne delivered a pinpoint corner as Tyrone Husbands headed Admiral into a 10th-minute lead before Ashley Taylor-Forbes set up Yemi Buraimoh to make it 2-0.