

Germans destress at fight club



The clean, brightly lit club is a short jog from the towers of Germany's financial centre and gives Frankfurt professionals a new way to destress. -- PHOTO:

FRANKFURT - WITH Germany's economy hitting the wall, Frankfurt professionals have plenty to worry about these days, so some put their minds to rest by pulling on gloves and slamming sandbags, or each other.

'They need a complete change of pace,' Mr Oliver Wolf of the Executive Sports Club told AFP as clients whacked the bags and padded mitts held by partners under the guidance of a second trainer, former US soldier Orleans Dawkins, 51.

'They are very hard on themselves,' Mr Wolf, 37, said with a note of respect for his high-earning proteges. 'They have strong characters and they are always looking to push their limits.' The clean, brightly lit club is a short jog from the towers of Germany's financial centre and sits just above the Petrescu sports center and its sweat-stained ring where boxing legends Max Schmeling, Joe Louis, Muhammad Ali and Sugar Ray Robinson trained for bouts.

Equity brokers Ines and Marisa, who preferred not to give their full names or identify the bank they worked for, dropped aerobics at a traditional gym in exchange for a kick-boxing workout here.

'You come to clear your head' by putting your body through its paces, Ines said.

'It was a hard day, and it won't get easier' at the boxing club, Marisa joked.

Both felt kick-boxing beat sharing running machines with investment bankers while they talked shop. 'And you have to watch n-tv there,' Ines added, referring to the German all-news television channel which has offered blanket coverage of the market meltdown.

That said, Mr Ollie Wolf, who has a good feel for people, gets to know his clients' specialities and pairs them up if he thinks they could both benefit, even hosting networking parties on occasion.

He also accompanied a financial expert to a competition of 'white-collar boxing' in London for bouts of 'hedge funds versus private equity, three rounds of two minutes each'. His clients typically range from their twenties to one who is over 60, and pay 99 euros (\$191) a month for the training.

Mr Milon Jenssen, a 41-year-old corporate finance consultant, said he had practiced the Korean martial art Tae Kwon Do, but 'wanted to discover a traditional European fighting sport'. Mr Jenssen said he was impressed by the technique and coordination needed to box, noting 'it's really serious and you are (fully) awake for at least a couple of minutes a day'.

All the trainees stressed that they forgot all else while boxing, since as Mr Wolf explained: 'You must be totally focused, otherwise you get hit.' His website also highlights 'the fascination of power' linked to boxing, and says that on top of speed, coordination and physical fitness, the sport 'brings out perseverance, self-confidence and courage'. Those qualities are surely useful these days in turbulent financial markets and other high-pressure sectors that provide the club's clientele.

'Those banking trading rooms are bear pits, they're appalling,' said British psychoanalyst Adam Jukes, who counts many London bankers among his patients.

The author of bestsellers on male psychology said the sport's physical focus let clients 'get out of their heads and all that kind of anxiety and stress that they have to deal with psychologically all day'. But Mr Jukes, who has done some boxing training as well, told AFP: 'It's still a highly competitive environment they're putting themselves into.'

Boxing, Mr Jukes said, was 'a competition in which the desire to hurt and dominate the other is explicit', though the Frankfurt club's clients insisted they come to train, not to tear into each other.

Ms Susanne Breuer, 29, used to practice ballet dancing but one day she 'saw some boxing and said: I'll try it'. 'The atmosphere is very different,' acknowledged Ms Breuer, a senior assistant to the director of the German publishers association.

'Guys are much more relaxed, it's much more fun.' Ms Breuer had been sparring with Slobodan Andjelc, who runs his own office cleaning company, and giving as good as she got.

'When you work 10 hours a day there's a lot of aggression' to get rid of, she explained.

The diminutive brunette said getting in the ring and protecting her face was not the toughest part.

'It was much harder getting used to hitting someone,' she said. 'There's a barrier' to be overcome.

Mr Mathias Loop, 34, who works for a bankruptcy law firm, said hitting the sandbag 'helps lower aggression, but that's not my main issue', and added: 'It's really a very hard and good and intensive workout.'

Mr Loop said his sparring and real-life partner, Ms Kika Michahelles, packed a punch too.

'I'm careful what I say to her because she hits very hard,' he joked. -- AFP