

Gill Oliver gets
ringside with
boxing artist
Grant Waters



Photographs: Antony Moore

Boxing clever



*Grant Waters' painting of
Terry Russell, a trainer at
South Moreton Boxing Club*



**British and
Commonwealth
heavyweight
champion boxer
Julius Francis**



In the same way a method actor lives a part, portrait painter Grant Waters literally put himself on the ropes for his art. After joining a south Oxfordshire boxing club last year, he became inspired to begin photographing, then painting, the scenes around him.

The result is an exhibition of ten oil paintings at South Moreton boxing club, with a striking portrait of British and Commonwealth heavyweight champion boxer Julius Francis, who has fought Mike Tyson, as its centrepiece.

Not many of us would dare to climb into the ring with Francis but Grant sparred with him, albeit on a friendly basis.

He said: "I hit Julius harder than I have ever hit anyone in my life and had to stop myself from asking 'are you okay?' I mean, of course he is going to be okay!

"Someone like Julius is a great subject and I have painted him twice. He looks great, has this extraordinary presence, and is a mountain of a man."

In the portrait, Francis is wearing a much-coveted Lonsdale belt, awarded only if a boxer wins three consecutive British title fights.

But Grant did not go to the club with the intention of painting what he saw, it happened entirely by accident.

"Someone like Julius is a great subject and I have painted him twice. He looks great, has this extraordinary presence, and is a mountain of a man."

He decided to join a gym last year to "make sure my chest was wider than my waist" and opted for the fitness classes modelled on the training regime of a boxer, including a light sparring session at the end.

"I promised my wife Rachel I would not box before I joined," he said. "I can go three rounds in sparring and know the basics, but I am not a proper boxer. By the third round, most people are exhausted.

"It makes you realise how fit the professionals are and as for the sparring, so far only my pride has been hurt."

One of the most inspiring aspects of the club is the mix of people.

"The club has a lot of atmosphere and I felt there was loads of potential.

"One of my favourite paintings is of a sparring session where none of the people in it look like boxers, and that is part of the attraction for me.

"One of the boxers in my pictures is a psychologist and another is a church warden who comes here to train and box.

"There is really good camaraderie here and an interesting mix of people. People are never critical. They are more likely to say 'Well done for having a go'.

Initially, it was not easy taking photographs in the club, he recalled.

"I did get the odd person asking what I was doing. Now I could stand here with my easel, as I feel I have earned my place."

Club owner John Houston, who appears in one of Grant's paintings, once trained at a boxing club in New York.

It had strong links with the local community, regularly inviting in artists to stage exhibitions



and even string quartets, and he wanted to do the same thing here.


John explained: "The idea of us hosting this exhibition during Artweeks is that people who come here just for the boxing will be introduced to the art and the ones who come just for the art will discover more about boxing."

Grant, who studied at Berkshire College of Art, does most of his painting at his studio in East Hendred and lives in East Hagbourne.

He has 20 years' experience teaching adult education classes in oils, acrylics, watercolours,

landscape and life drawing.

He added: "Although I did not know much about boxing before I came here, my father's brother Terry was an amateur boxer.

"I have dedicated the exhibition to him." 

■ Grant Waters' work is on show at the South Moreton Boxing Club at Hall Farm, South Moreton from May 5-27 from 10.30am-8pm daily, except Saturdays 10.30am-6pm, and Sundays, 10.30am-4pm. For more information, visit the website: www.grantsartwork.co.uk