



Kostya Tszyu

by Adam Leto

If you want to be respected by others the great thing is to respect yourself. Only by that, only by self-respect will you compel others to respect you.

- Fyodor Dostoyevsky

Respect

Respect is a word that many of Kostya Tszyu's opponents have used during their description of the pig-tailed power-puncher over the years. It is something that the 37-year-old commands from others and not just from the fist-clenched fighter in the opposite corner, but, more importantly, from those on the other side of the ropes, where his actions and approach to life have won him plenty of admiration.

He is loved by people all around the world, most notably in his native Russia and of course his adopted homeland of Australia, where his down-to-earth, pleasant nature and no-nonsense style have been warmly received.

As much as Aussies love a winner, success does not always guarantee popularity. There are finer qualities, which are revered within our sporting culture, things such as discipline, humility and sportsmanship; traits which many consider just as significant as who eventually ends up on the winner's dais. Character, it would seem, is what ultimately distinguishes a winner from a true champion and it is why the name Kostya Tszyu is held in such high regard.

Shooting sports

It shouldn't surprise that Kostya, a SSAA member, chose to take to the shooting sports not long after he arrived in Australia, in 1992. This was shortly after having fought his first professional bout against Darrell Hiles in Melbourne, in which Kosyta won by knock-out.

"It was 1993 when I first got involved," he recalls.

"We [Kostya and wife Natasha] needed to do something; we were new in the country, bored, so we decided to go to the [pistol] club.

"It was good. We used to go on a weekly basis, every Tuesday or Wednesday."

Having forged a sporting career based on discipline, mental strength and accuracy, pistol shooting seemed a natural choice.

And while he hasn't had too many "bad days" in the ring, during a stellar boxing journey, hitting the target out on the range has proved, at times, a more difficult challenge than landing that knock-out blow.

"[Pistol shooting] is a good sport, because if you're not 100 per cent focused on what you're doing, then it shows," he said.

"You can tell if you're not concentrating, if you're upset with something or you've had a bad day; the target doesn't lie."

Kostya currently owns a Smith & Wesson .22 revolver, a firearm which he says has served him well over the years as it is "good to learn with". He plans to purchase a .22 self-loader, more than likely a Beretta, some time soon.

Although he doesn't own any longarms, Kostya hopes to one day purchase a large outback property and get more involved with hunting. He has been on quite a few "adventures" in his native homeland, including tracking moose through the Russian mountain-tops in a helicopter, while many of his friends enjoy the thrill of chasing grizzlies.

However, for the time being, Kostya is simply content to test his skills indoors at his local range. It is here where his strongest opponent lies.

"The thing I enjoy about shooting is the competition. Not competing against someone else, but going out there and trying to beat yourself, that is the toughest thing," he said.

"You have to respect the firearm; you become part of the gun. A gun is a very powerful tool; it must be respected all the time."

The introduction of tougher handgun legislation has been a hot topic in recent months, following an increase in gang and outlaw biker violence. Kostya, however, dismisses the need for tighter controls and adds that if opponents of firearms were to visit any range or club, they would realise how safe the shooting sports and legitimate gun owners are.

"When you go out to these clubs you see how strict the rules are," he says.

"I'm sure that 100 per cent of the people who are members aren't the people who are committing these crimes. The people who are doing the wrong thing have never been to a club."

Life is one big lesson

Whether he is lining up his sights out on the range, talking business or playing with his three young kids, Timophey, Anastasia or Nikita, Kostya says there is always something to be learnt and his focus very rarely strays from the bigger picture. For most of his life boxing has been the centre of his attention.

"Everything I've done outside of the boxing ring - everything - I've done to improve my boxing career," he says.

"I'm sure [shooting] has had some very good effects, when it comes to my concen-

tration, balance and accuracy.

"Anything I do, I've always aimed to move forward; it applies to everything that you do in life."

Kostya does not like to lose, no matter what it is, but is not afraid of failure. Those who witnessed his dazzling display last year on Channel 7's *Dancing with the Stars* could verify his commitment and desire to succeed. While he finished runner-up to one-time weatherman Grant Denyer, Kostya lost no admirers.

"I don't like to lose and the reason I went on the show was to win," he says.

"But from day one I always believed in myself and thought I improved each week.

"It's about attitude; I've always had a winning attitude.

"You can't win everything, but if you do lose it's important to keep thinking forward, not backwards, and learn from what went wrong."

Far different from the ducking and weaving he was accustomed to, his movement on the dance floor wasn't born of instinct, but much like everything else he has succeeded in, developed through hard work. When asked if he had ever danced prior to his television appearance, Kostya shook his head almost sheepishly and said, "Ask my wife."

Despite his inexperience, it wasn't the timing or the movement which Kostya struggled to grasp, but a skill which, for most, would appear the simplest; however, for the former one-time undisputed welterweight champion didn't come easy.

"Smiling. They always want you to smile out there," he said. "The most difficult thing to learn to do was smile, so I had to try and relax a bit more than usual, but I think I did a good job in the end."

Family

The newest addition to the Kostya household is nestled in the safe arms of her owner. When curled up, she is barely big enough to fit in the palm of Kostya, who is making sure that Princess, the family's Cavalier puppy, is settling in to her surroundings during her first few days.

As he hands her over to Natasha, his father, sister and her children converge on Princess, armed with playful fingers and bright smiles. The Tszyu clan are a tight-knit bunch.

The Russian-Australian explains that while his own children are far better off than he was at the same age, instilling the same beliefs and discipline that was drummed into him during his early years is an important part of their growth.

"You have to earn your space in this

world, you have to earn every single move, you should not get anything for free," he says.

"[My children] have to work hard. For example, if they want something, they do not just get it easily. I can afford to buy anything for them, but I don't - they have to learn to respect money.

"Kids need to learn responsibility from a young age; they need to learn how to be responsible for something. Discipline is obviously very important and slowly, step by step, as they get older, their responsibilities increase."

While Kostya is still to decide whether to throw in the towel on an impressive professional boxing career, which includes just two losses, it is clear that his goals have changed. These days he is more relaxed, has more free time to spend with his family and admits he is "just enjoying life".

You can't say that he hasn't earned the right to put his feet up, even if it is only for a short while. After nearly 30 years spent conditioning his body to withstand pain, honing his pugilistic skills and testing his mental strength - on his way to becoming one of the most successful boxers of his generation - Kostya has not forgotten how it all started.

Born in the Russian town of Serov, for the first 13 years of his life, he shared a room no bigger than 16 sq m with his parents and sister.

"This room was everything; it had a fridge, a table, a bed for my parents, a bed for my sister and I slept under the table," he recalls.

"I can't even understand this now. I mean this room is 16 sq m, how could you fit everything you have in this one room?"

"I have a very good appreciation of where I come from."

Kostya respects the depth of his origins as much as he recognises that there is still a long path ahead. Always ready for a challenge, his ventures outside of the ring have mirrored his success inside it.

He has helped set up numerous gyms and boxing tournaments in Russia and along with his various business interests manages young up-and-coming fighters to ensure they "take the right steps". He also does a lot of work with charities.

"I've always set myself very big goals in terms of business and it takes a lot of work and study," he says.

"But most things I do now I do for enjoyment, and I'm very happy to give something back.

"I enjoy helping other people and I'm in a position where I can influence people to stay on the right track; that is something I

know I can do and like to do."

His visits to Russia are self-funded and the money he makes from the tournaments he has organised is reinvested into facilities for underprivileged areas.

"All the money we make goes to help kids in these places, where they don't have too much," he says.

"You get a huge satisfaction from these types of things and it is so enjoyable - it's beautiful."

Kostya Tszyu made his name through boxing, a sporting vehicle which has taken him to places he never thought he'd see and to people most never get a chance to meet. Although much success has been crafted from his gift of the gloves, outside of the ring, his impact has been just as felt and it is where his greatest achievements lie.

"What I've got is beyond my dreams," he says.

"I knew that I was going to be world champion. But having the world champion belt is not what I've really achieved.

"Probably the biggest achievement is the love that I've received from people."

And not to mention their respect. ●



Princess, the newest addition to the Kostya household, is nestled in the safe arms of her owner.