TRADING GUNS FOR PUNCHES

IN RIO, KIDS AS YOUNG AS 14 HANG OUT ON THE STREETS WITH M16S, NOT SATCHELS, AROUND THEIR NECKS

Rio's slums are sprawling with weapons and gang warfare. But where police have thrown in the towel, an Englishman, Luke Dowdney, has taken violence off the streets with his fight club for the favelas

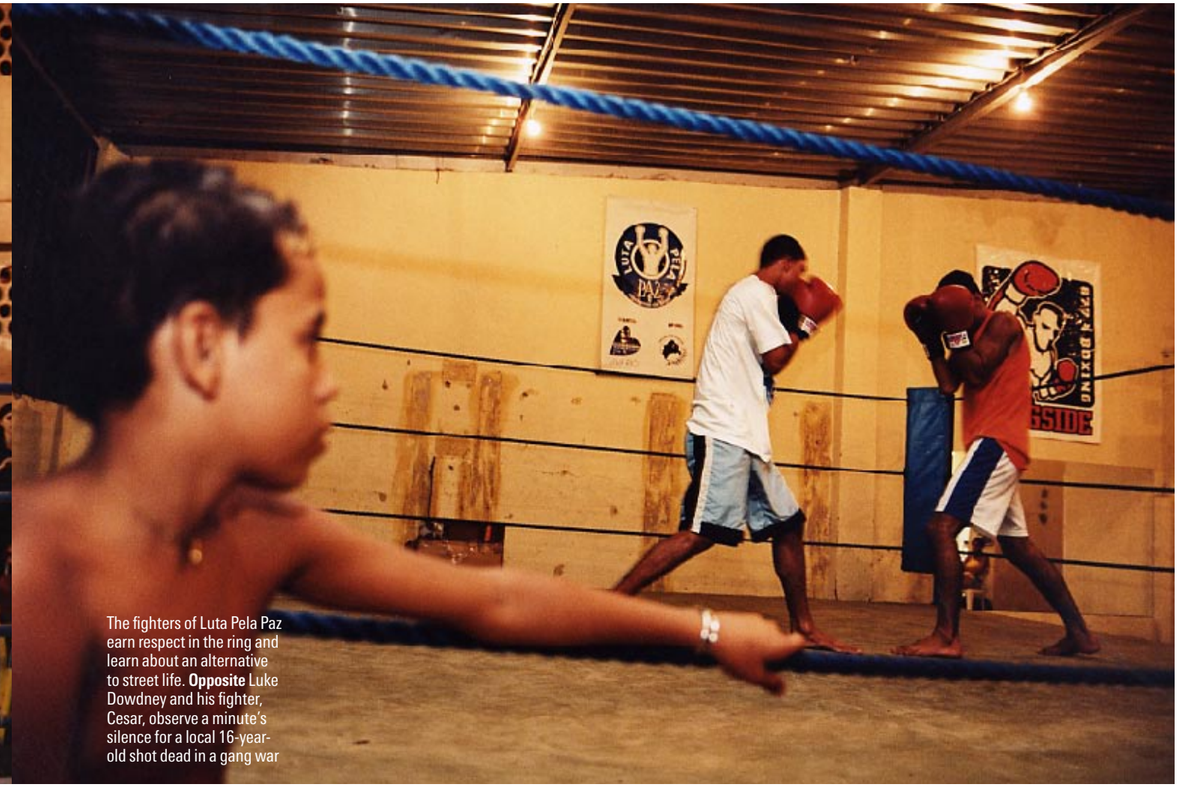
Story by Sanjiv Bhattacharya

Photographs by Zed Nelson

There are few better signs of a world gone wrong than children patrolling the streets with the weapons of war – kids as young as 14, hanging out on street corners, with M16s rather than satchels swinging around their necks. I can see them from the window – three boys leaning against a hatchback parked in the middle of the street. They have their music turned up. One is reading a magazine. Another is dancing, the butt of his AK clacking against the car door.

You might expect such a sight in Rwanda or Sierra Leone – some far-gone death swamp from the headline news. But this is Rio de Janeiro, the tourist capital of South America, on an ordinary day in May. These kids are not at war, they're at work for the drug traffickers who have made Rio's favelas, or shanty towns, their dominion. And the locals, or *favelados,* ▶

Right Training at the Luta Pela Paz gym shifts focus from gun-fighting to fist-fighting. **Above** A member of Rio's arms-control force examines some of the 4,000 firearms it confiscates each month



The fighters of Luta Pela Paz earn respect in the ring and learn about an alternative to street life. **Opposite** Luke Dowdney and his fighter, Cesar, observe a minute's silence for a local 16-year-old shot dead in a gang war

▶ are quite accustomed to them by now. Every night, as darkness falls, they pass the boys with guns on their way home. No one scurries – kids on bikes, parents heaped with shopping, young mothers with babies bouncing on their hips. No one so much as looks twice.

For the photographer, Zed, and me, however, different rules apply – all outsiders, Brazilian or otherwise, are unwelcome in the favelas at night, and journalists even more so, especially photographers. Without the permission of the ruling drug faction, the *Comando Vermelho* (Red Command), we are decidedly *gringo non grata*, though our mission is innocent enough. We're not here to expose any crime, just to tell the story of a boxing club called Luta Pela Paz (Fight For Peace), which was founded four years ago by Luke Dowdney, a 32-year-old anthropology masters from Kew, Surrey. A former amateur boxer himself, he was so fascinated by the armed children of Rio that he moved there in 1997, built a gym in the thick of the action and wrote a book called *Children Of The Drug Trade*.

"Look, it's not a problem if you stay in the club," he tells us on the drive in, "but the favela is a bit tense now. There was a killing the other day and everyone expects a revenge attack, so you can't go walking about on your own. And

SOMETHING ABOUT THE RING INSTILS A SELF-RESPECT IN KIDS WHO WOULD OTHERWISE BE RIPE FOR JUVENILE HALL

definitely, *definitely*, whatever happens – no pictures of *anything* outside the club."

Luke has been on about this no-pictures rule since our first e-mail exchange six months ago. He needn't worry so much – our appetite for sneaking a snap faded soon after we heard what happened to the last guy. In 2002, Tim Lopes was the best-known investigative journalist on Brazilian TV. Then the *Comando Vermelho* caught him with a hidden camera in his coat. A man named Elias Maluco, or "Crazy Elias", took him to the "microwave" caves (so-called because traffickers use them to burn bodies), tortured and killed him, ultimately opening him up from neck to navel with a samurai sword.

Only minutes earlier we narrowly escaped a showdown of our own. We were leaving the gym with camera bags and all, literally halfway down the stairs, when one of Luke's fighters, a kid named Cesar, came running up to stop us. He had left the club a minute earlier, spotted the gunmen pulling up and thought to turn back in the nick of time. "They're right outside," he says, breathlessly, ushering us back into the gym. "You can't leave now, it's too dangerous."

So now we're confined to the gym, spying on the gunmen from the first-floor window and wondering how we'll ever make it back to our hotels – it's not unknown for the traffickers to hold their positions until the early morning. Over the sounds of Tupac from the gym stereo, and the snort and slap of kids working on the heavy bag, we to-and-fro about our options: should we wait and hope they move on, or change into gym T-shirts as camouflage? Surely we could explain that we're just Luke's friends and not journalists at all?

Cesar shakes his head, Luke chews his lip. There are flurries of urgent Portuguese. "What they're saying," says Luke, "is that I can walk you out, but do you want to risk it with the camera bags? If they suspect anything, they'll search you and then you're fucked, basically. Have you got a press card? See, that's a problem. And that," – he points at the tripod – "that's not going anywhere. It looks too much like a gun."

It's of small comfort that, as Luke says, "You're less likely to be killed because dead foreigners tend to attract a lot of police attention." In the state of Rio, "less" is relative to a murder rate that dwarfs those in places where one imagines gun crime to be a major problem, like New York and California. For example, in 1999 the rate of firearm deaths per 100,000 inhabitants was 9.2 in California and 5.6 in the state of New York – in Rio state it was 41.6.

So in the end, caution wins out. We leave our bags and tripod at the gym, take a deep breath and cross the street to Luke's waiting car, parked ten yards from the gunmen. If they ask, we decide, Luke will tell them we're just tourists on holiday. It's a taut, vivid walk, enough to get the heart tolling. The hardest part is not staring, like sitting on a cliff's edge and not jumping.

"Shit," says Luke, when the last door is closed. He's flipping the broken light switch inside his car. "I've got to get that fixed. You have to keep your inside lights on at night otherwise the traffickers will stop you."

We drive slowly past the kids with guns, giving them a good chance to check us out, and then on to the favela's edge where the rest of Rio begins. And there at the end, less than 200 metres from where the traffickers wield their weapons, a military policeman stands holding much the same kind of gun. Like the traffickers, he is also looking into every passing car.

Again, Luke curses the broken light switch. "The cops want the inside light on, too."

WE'RE CONFINED TO THE GYM, SPYING ON GUNMEN FROM THE WINDOW, WONDERING HOW WE'LL GET OUT

To say that Rio is divided is like saying Brazilians play a bit of football. The place is so split, it's not so much one city as two worlds. There are the poor – the *favelados*, who live in slums controlled by drug traffickers – and the rest, the *asfaltos*, or literally, "those who live on asphalt". In Rio, asphalt is aspirational.

The best view of the city's schism is from a tourist helicopter as it swoops in from the sea, over the blonde, crescent beaches of Copacabana and Ipanema and the bustle of the city proper – so far, so *asfaltos*. Then at the far edge, the landscape changes. Where the rumpled broccoli slopes of the jungle take over, the favelas begin, each one a matchbox scramble of shanty-brick homes clinging improbably to this hill face and that. They proliferate like a Petri culture, teeming and clustering in crevices. Some are perched so high their views shame those of the most expensive hotel suites in Ipanema. And at night, when the lights go on, they make the hills of Rio twinkle like giant mounds of ore.

Though the favelas are now demonised as festering colonies of crime, they were born, like many slums, from the hope of struggling migrants. In the early 20th century, waves of rural poor came from the north-east of Brazil, drawn inexorably to the perceived promise of a port city. Jobs were scarce, though many found enough menial work to improvise a rudimentary home, and so the slums grew from pockets into islands of privation, adrift from the main city, looking down from their ramshackle roosts. The gulf between the favelas and the rest of the city was not only permitted but effectively nurtured by the state of Rio, which for years treated the residents as illegal squatters, contained them with shoot-first policing and starved them of basic investment, even decent sanitation and electricity. Yet still the favelas mushroomed – today Rio has more than 500 slums, with a head count of more than one million. It's no surprise to Brazilians that most of them are black. So much for the melting pot myth; Brazil was the last country in the Americas to abolish slavery.

When the drug bosses took control, they were filling an empty seat. Decades of neglect had left the favelas fertile for crime – full of labyrinthine gullies, swollen with poverty and resentful of the police. So when a blizzard of cocaine blew ▶

Police officers embark on an operation inside one of Rio's many isolated shanty towns. **Inset** Former drug trafficker Leandro is off the streets, and a home-made barbell is the only thing he pushes

'THE POLICE TREAT ALL US FAVELA KIDS LIKE CRIMINALS. THEY DON'T CARE BECAUSE THEY DON'T LIVE HERE'
CESAR, BOXER

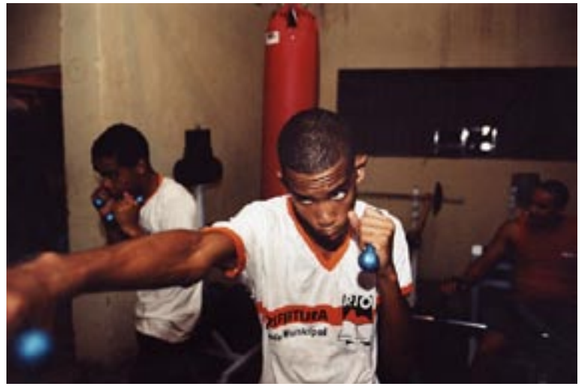
▶ in from Colombia, Bolivia and Peru in the Seventies, the port city – for a criminal few – began to yield its promise at last. Rio became a vital channel for traffickers, and the hillside favelas became their kingdom.

Today, Rio's favelas are carved among three main gangs – *Amigos Dos Amigos* (Friends Of Friends), *Terceiro Comando* (the Third Command) and the most powerful by far, *Comando Vermelho*. Though they are run from a handful of bleak, medieval prisons which tend to erupt periodically into epic riots – 38 died at the Benfica prison riots in June last year – they operate at a level far beyond that of, say, the Crips and Bloods of Los Angeles. Rio's drug gangs adopt a pseudo-military command structure and they observe a social contract with favela residents – in return for silence, they maintain order, settle disputes and keep the streets free of any crime but their own. And crucially, they ensure that the much-loathed police do not dare intrude without bulletproof vests.

For many middle-class Cariocas, residents of Rio's more central districts, the favelas induce a kind of hysteria – they've read so often about these lawless Bantustans on their doorsteps, with their savage drug lords and everyday murders. The shop girls of Ipanema gasp when I mention the boxing club – they have never visited a favela and probably never will. The taxi driver will only take us to the favela's edge. The pilot of the tourist helicopter won't fly overhead for fear of being shot at. According to the hotel concierge, our only hope of leaving a favela intact is to take the Favela Tour – a grotesque scheme that offers tourists the chance to observe poor people as they would gibbons, from the safety of a safari jeep.

The panic stems as much from the shrieking headlines as from the flapping of the authorities. In 2003, for example, when the violence tumbled down the forested slopes, the *Comando Vermelho* created havoc in Copacabana by tossing bombs at beach-front hotels and machine-gunning a nearby mall. After this bloody spate – in which more than 100 were killed in a fortnight – the only reassurance that Cariocas were given was the resurrection of the hare-brained idea of building a three-metre wall around the slums to keep the traffickers at bay.

Meanwhile *favelados*, needless to say, protest their criminal reputation. They blame heavy-handed policing and a fear-mongering media for fuelling an anti-favela prejudice that is already rife among Rio's employers. Though the traffickers are in charge they say they comprise only one per cent of *favelados*, and for all their internecine brutality, they keep the favelas free of mugging, robbery and rape, which is more than can be said for Copacabana beach. ▶



The Rocinha slum looks down at the riches of Rio's city centre, inversely reflecting its residents' position in society. **Opposite, clockwise from top left** Female fighters tape up before training; the youths who aim to punch above their weight; something to cheer about; Luke Dowdney straps in Cesar for a bout

▶ As a result, an oddly symmetrical chasm has opened up between the two Rios. Many *favelados* are just as afraid to leave the favelas as the *asfaltos* are to enter them. And they fear the same things – street crime and the prejudice of the respective law enforcers, which for the *asfaltos* means the traffickers, and for the *favelados* means the police.

Luta Pela Paz is Luke's attempt to bridge the gulf for at least a few, and he could not have picked a more fitting favela. Complexo Da Mare is not only the nearest slum to Rio airport – the first to greet any tourist – but it is the most divided and therefore the most violent. While most favelas are run by one or other of the three main factions, Mare comprises 15 favelas which are contested by all three. The fights over territory are constant.

We have arrived in a particularly fiery week. A couple of days ago, a *soldado* for the *Comando Vermelho* (in whose territory the club is based) was shot while guarding a *boca*, a drugs sales point. The talk at the club is that three members of the neighbouring *Terceiro Comando* faction crossed the line between territories and tried to take him hostage. When he put up a fight, they shot him in the head, right outside his front door. He was 16 years old.

"He lived right next to me, I grew up with him," says Cesar. It's the day of the funeral and he's sitting in the gym, looking at his feet. A goofy, sleepy-looking kid at the best of times, he looks especially depleted today. "He was someone I really cared about. I couldn't go to the funeral, it's too much for me. I don't need to see his body again. The day he was killed I saw him lying there in the street."

Cesar is typical of the kids in Mare, most of whom have recognised a corpse in their time. He knows many traffickers as friends, and there was a time when Cesar might have joined them. When he was nine his dad was sentenced to 27 years for armed robbery. His mother is an alcoholic, so Cesar spent most of his youth skipping school and fighting in the street. He was an angry kid. "All I wanted was money," he says. "I would have done anything it took."

Then four years ago, around the time that his friend began work as a *vapor*, or street dealer, Cesar heard that a "crazy gringo" was giving boxing classes in his favela. He liked the idea of being a better fighter, and so began training at Luta Pela Paz, and his life turned a corner. The street fighting stopped and he now works for the club as a counsellor. He has a three-year-old child and a wife, and they've just moved out of his mother's home into a place of their own.

Boxing gyms have a long history of rescuing the almost-delinquent. Something about the ring, the training and courage required instils a self-respect and focus in kids who would otherwise be ripe for juvenile hall. Kids get a rep from boxing; it proves they have balls, that they're tough. Those with absent fathers, like Cesar, often find a father figure in the coach and others find a girlfriend in the girls' class. But Luta Pela Paz takes the social aspect of the gym much further. There is a rule – no one gets boxing instruction until they take the "citizenship classes", where they learn how their community is run, how to access education, how to vote, how to find work: a kind of elementary course in civics. And crucially, Luta Pela Paz actively helps its fighters find jobs as cleaners and office assistants in Rio. Some like Cesar find work at the club itself.

Remarkably, given the circumstances, Cesar would still rather see traffickers run the favela than cops. Like most kids in the favela, he has experienced police harassment. "They beat me up, they held me for no reason, not just once but many times. They treat all us favela kids like criminals. They don't care because they don't live here," he says. "But the traffickers are from here, and they at least make a contribution. They hold these baile funk parties where, it's true, they sell drugs, but they also bring the top DJs and bands. On Mother's Day, they gave away brand-new sofas and home appliances, and on Children's Day they gave away toys and presents. And they keep the favela safe. If you rape a woman in the favela, the traffickers will kill you, simple as that. So there are no rapes and no one dares to steal within the community. For us, it's much safer than Copacabana."

As Cesar speaks, the trainer Luis calls together everyone in the club for what looks like a team talk. Our interpreter explains that he's warning everyone that the *Comando Vermelho* is planning an invasion of the *Terceiro Comando* territory as revenge for the murder of Cesar's friend. Anyone who needs to get home before the guns go off should do so at once.

"We always get warnings before the fighting begins," says Danilo, a lanky 16-year-old who delivered the news to Luis in the first place. News travels fast in the favela, from shop to shop, block to block. "The reason I heard it first is because I live right on the line [between the *Comando Vermelho* and the *Terceiro Comando*]. Right outside my house is a *boca*."

There's little to distinguish this frontline but for bullet holes and a scrawled "CV" on the walls. Until a decade or so ago it didn't exist, but now the families who moved there find themselves in the middle of a battle zone. Danilo's family has lived there for 35 years. He has seven brothers and sisters, his grandparents, an uncle and an aunt all living in one three-storey, three-bedroom home. When he gets home, Danilo will find them all sleeping on the ground floor – that's the usual drill. "Three years ago, two of my uncles were killed by stray bullets," says Danilo. "They can go through the walls. One time, a bullet went through the neighbour's house, through our door and into our refrigerator – that was three months ago, probably my closest shave." One of the symptoms of children wielding AK-47s is that they cannot always handle such powerful guns, so when they shoot, the guns buck and the bullets fly all over the place. The floor is your safest bet.

Only 20 minutes after we are whisked out of the club the air crackles with gunfire. In the morning, two more will be dead, and again the newspapers will say nothing of it. This time the bodies are from the *Terceiro Comando* side. Which leaves an extra body to be avenged.

For a world gone wrong, Mare by day throbs with life. Especially on Saturday, when the market's on and the air is thick with grill smoke and music. It has the same shanty aesthetic as Calcutta or the Bombay bustees – skeletal, exposed, with its organs laid bare. A scribble of electricity cables cat-cradles the streets; iron frames jut out of half-built roofs; you can see into people's houses, the TV soaps they're watching. And everything seems to happen out in the street. Beside a man killing chickens stands another tinkering with a disembowelled Fiat. There are kids everywhere chasing dogs, flying kites and blowing bubbles. Later tonight they will hold assault rifles. It seems so improbable now.

We take a short tour of the favela with Leandro, a former *soldado* who joined the traffickers when he was 13. Three years later he was holding an M16 outside where the Luta Pela Paz is now. "I saw how the playboys of Rio were living and I looked at my mother working so hard for so little," he says. "So I was determined to get money, to take it if I had to." He did well, making about £500 per month (the average monthly wage in Brazil is £36), but he spent it all on women. So now, at 24, having seen more than 30 people die by the gun, he lives with his mother and younger brother in a tiny box home near the edge of the favela. The floors are stone, the walls unplastered, the rooms are small and crisscrossed with washing lines. His bedroom had no ceiling until he built one himself. ▶

▶ We walk to the edge of the favela, near the soccer pitch and highway, where Luta Pela Paz is hoping to expand with a new three-storey gym with a deck of classrooms and computers. So far Luke has raised £100,000 from some Brazilian NGOs and Britain's generous Laureus Foundation, and he is £50,000 away from actually beginning construction.

"At least it will be a positive contribution, not like that," says Leandro, pointing dismissively at the looming police battalion down the street. "They could have actually helped the community with that money, but instead they built a bulletproof fort. No one in Mare has anything good to say about the police."

There are no police stations inside Mare; it has been more than a year since policemen actually patrolled the streets. The last time was in spring 2003 when the war between the *Comando Vermelho* and the *Terceiro Comando* was raging. So the police invaded – meaning Mare had three months of peace. "But then they left suddenly to come and sit in this battalion," says Leandro. "We all know why – everyone knows who calls the shots around here."

When it comes to corruption, the Rio police make the LAPD look like boy scouts – on this at least, Rio is united, *asfaltos* and *favelados* alike. They both agree that a reformed police force is the first step towards tackling the favela problem, but no one foresees any such thing in the near future. The tumour outweighs the organ at this point.

Rio cops can be bought because they are underpaid – most have second jobs. Even Ruben Da Silva, the man charged with monitoring the 4,000 or so guns that are confiscated from crimes in Rio each month, turns out to be a part-time cabbie. He works in a grand old civic building in town, a cathedral of elegant decrepitude where, behind a metal gate, his team of five old men try valiantly to register an arms deluge that spills out of the warehouse and all over the office. Walking gingerly on a carpet of revolvers and strewn ammunition, we listen to Ruben moan about how his lungs are choked from all the gun dust. Yet when we leave, no one checks our bags, there is no metal detector or pat down – we might have easily walked out with a sack full of pistols and bullets.

But Ruben Da Silva is a minor cog. The machinations of power – both state and criminal – are best seen in the extraordinary drama still unfolding in Rocinha, Rio's largest favela. For eight years, Rocinha was under the control of a drug lord named Luciano Barbosa da Silva, or "Lulu". Then in April 2004, the police invaded the favela and killed him. The sheer scale of the invasion was remarkable – an army of 1,200 military police was raised from 25 separate forces – particularly as it was to topple a trafficker who was only 26 years old (Lulu was only 18 when he seized control of a favela with a population of 160,000). But most remarkable of all was the reaction of Rocinha's residents, which thoroughly baffled the Brazilian media – rather than celebrate, they mourned in public. Lulu became a folk hero. Shops were closed out of respect; black drapes were hung in windows.

"People don't understand why we mourned Lulu, a criminal," says Carlinho, the head of one of three residents' associations in Rocinha. "Well, since the police have been here, they have killed 17 people. Does that tell you anything? Yes, Lulu was a trafficker, but for eight years under him, we had peace. He was ethical. Violence was not his first option. He protected the residents with his guns."

Carlinho knew Lulu when he was a shy schoolkid. His development into one of Rio's best-known traffickers is a tale worthy of the movie treatment. But for Carlinho, it is not Lulu's heroic status, nor his age that makes his story important – it is the way he was killed. Speaking for "most people in Rocinha", he believes the trouble started when Brazil's most notorious drug baron, Fernandinho Beira Mar – also known as Freddy Seashore – decided to seize Rocinha from Lulu's grasp. Though now in jail, Beira Mar remains one of the *Comando Vermelho*'s most senior bosses, and he's widely suspected of having bought the freedom of the former boss of Rocinha, a brutal gangster called Eduíno Eustáquio de Araújo Filho, or "Dudu". With 25 years left to serve on his sentence, Dudu was mysteriously granted compassionate leave at Christmas 2003. He jumped parole and the Brazilian media began the drum roll for an impending war between Dudu and Lulu. In a world gone wrong, the most feared criminals have Tellytubby names.

"Dudu invaded on Good Friday," says Carlinho. "The gunfight lasted for four hours. On that first night, three people were killed, all of them innocent. None were traffickers." By Monday, the death toll was ten and the headlines were pronouncing a breakdown of law and order. And by Tuesday, the police had invaded, tracking down Lulu to his friend's house and shooting him dead.

What was solved with his murder, though, is hard to tell. In an industry that is thought to turn over £8.7m per month in Rocinha, the death of Lulu only creates a vacuum. And when the death of a so-called "bad guy" is such bad news, you wonder who the good guys are. As one of murdered journalist Tim Lopes' colleagues, Miriam Leitao, wrote in Rio's *O Globo* newspaper, "It's no longer just the old fight of the police against the outlaw. It's more complex than that. You can't build a network so powerful without connections with the police."

For now, order is kept by a huge police presence, which is of no comfort to residents. "Lulu's guns were turned against invaders but police guns are more dangerous because they are turned against the population," says Carlinho. "And Dudu is still at large. So what do you think will happen when these police leave? This is why the people of Rocinha cannot rest. We're waiting for Dudu to invade."

As night falls over Rio and the favela lights speckle the hillsides, Cesar stands gloved up in his corner. Luta Pela Paz has put on a fight card to include several other Rio boxing clubs and Cesar's is the last fight of the night. At first Luke wanted to hold it in Mare itself, but most clubs are afraid to visit Mare these days, so we're in a hangar, on what is usually an indoor football pitch.

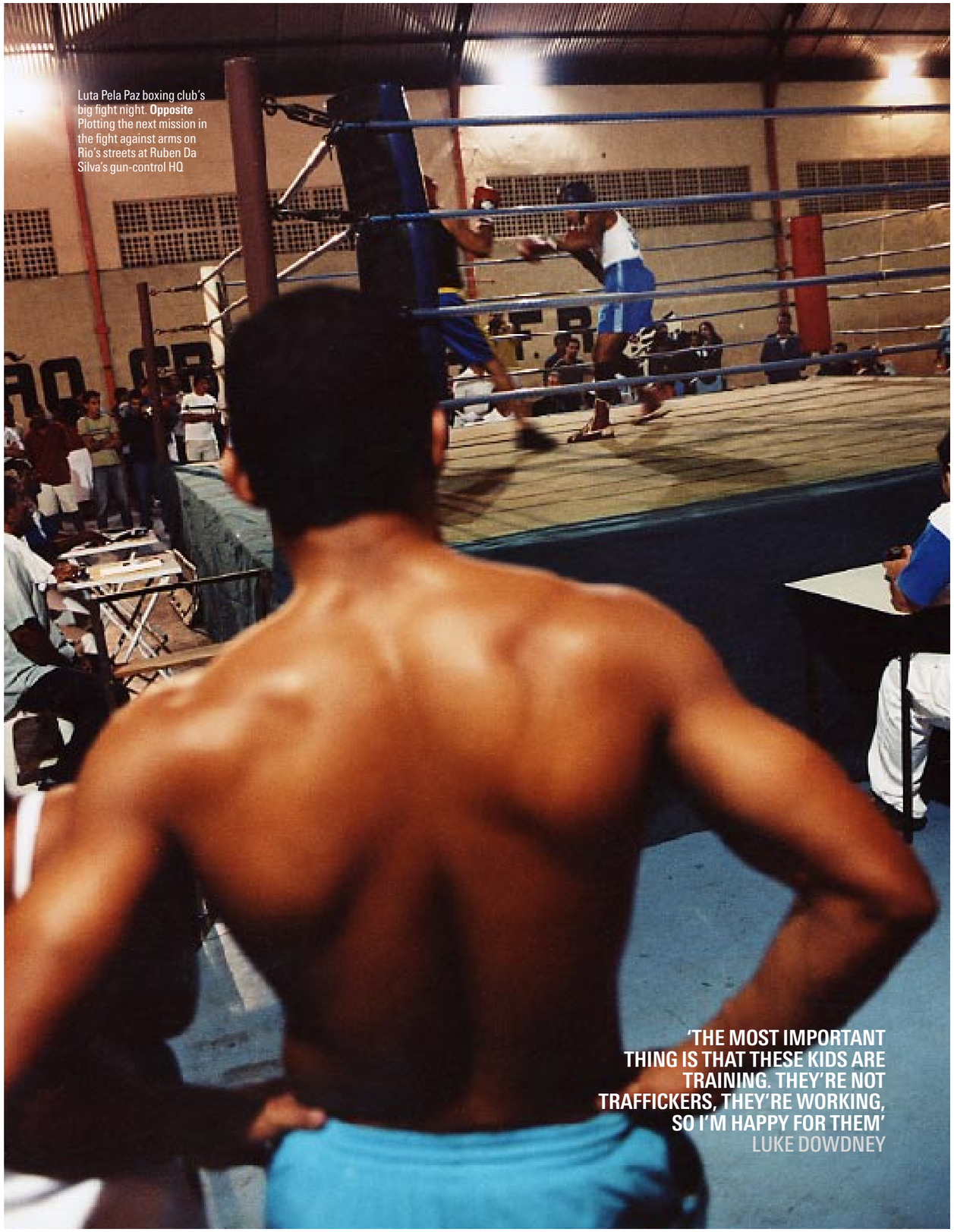
It has been a scrappy night. As Luke admits, none of his fighters are about to storm the Brazilian Olympic squad. "But it's a bonus if they're any good," he says. "The most important thing is that they train – they're not traffickers, they're working, so I'm happy for them." The kids look happy too, goofing around and showing off. Amid the guns, drugs and poverty of the favelas, Luta Pela Paz is a place where the kids can be kids again.

The promoter declares a minute's silence for Cesar's dead friend and the chatter peters out until the only sound left is a baby crying. In this long, sobbing minute, the people of Rochinha are scurrying back to their homes, as the police patrol the favela in armoured vans. In Mare, the *soldades* are pulling up outside the club again, awaiting news of a reprisal by the *Terceiro Comandos*. And in the editorial offices of *O Globo*, still no one has reported the death of Cesar's friend.

The minute is up. The silence dissolves and Luke leans in to give his final instructions as a chant begins to fill the hall – "Ceeeee-saaaar! Ceeeee-saaaar!" Luta Pela Paz is in strong voice tonight. The referee brings both fighters together. Stools are removed, coaches climb through the ropes and Cesar raises his fists, flexing his head from side to side.

The bell rings. GQ

Some names have been changed. Luke Dowdney was recently awarded an MBE. For more info, visit: www.coav.org.br or www.lutapelapaz.org.br



Luta Pela Paz boxing club's big fight night. **Opposite** Plotting the next mission in the fight against arms on Rio's streets at Ruben Da Silva's gun-control HQ

'THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IS THAT THESE KIDS ARE TRAINING. THEY'RE NOT TRAFFICKERS, THEY'RE WORKING, SO I'M HAPPY FOR THEM'
LUKE DOWDNEY