

RYAN J. SMITH

**PUNCHING
ABOVE
YOUR
WEIGHT**

BOOK CLUB
DISCUSSION GUIDE



AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you for choosing *Punching Above Your Weight* for your club.

I wrote this book for the underestimated - for anyone who's felt overlooked, outmatched, or outpaced by a world moving too fast. My hope is that these questions don't just spark discussion, but ignite something deeper: clarity, courage, and conviction to fight your fight on your terms.

Use these pages to reflect, challenge each other, and sharpen your stance. May you leave each session feeling stronger, clearer, and more grounded in who you are and what you're building.

Stay dangerous. Stay human.

-RYAN J. SMITH

Introduction

Fight Smarter

1. Ryan describes boxing as “the sweet science.” How does this framing shift your view of AI as a tool or threat?
2. The author says, “You win not by being the strongest – you win by being the smartest in the ring.” Where in your work or life have you seen this principle play out?
3. Ali’s strategy was as important as his force. How might you apply strategic thinking rather than sheer effort this week?
4. The introduction notes most AI advice is written for people who’ve already made it. How does this book’s perspective feel different so far?
5. Ryan writes, “Most people aren’t afraid of work. They’re afraid of being left behind.” Does this resonate with your own fears or motivations right now?
6. The author intentionally features quotes from women and people of color. How does this choice impact your experience as a reader?
7. Ali and Frazier’s gloves sit on his studio shelf as symbols of earned victory. What physical object in your life represents earned struggle or victory for you?
8. Ryan says, “If you’ve ever felt underestimated, overlooked, or outmatched – this is your corner.” When have you felt this way, and how did you respond?
9. The author promises structure, clarity, and purpose. What do you hope to gain from reading this book with this group?
10. Reflecting on the “hype music for the underdog,” what is your personal entrance song for this chapter of your life?

Round One

Wake Up to the Fight

1. Ryan writes, “AI is not the villain because it’s evil. It’s the villain because it’s relentless.” What does this mean to you?
2. The chapter talks about training vs. fighting. Where are you currently training, and where are you fighting in your life?
3. Marcus Aurelius is quoted: “You could leave life right now. Let that determine what you do, say, and think.” How does this land with you today?
4. Frida Kahlo turned her limits into design constraints. What’s one limit in your life that could become a creative constraint?
5. The author says, “AI is a mirror.” What would AI reflect back about how you work today?
6. Ryan shares about starting GRAIN before dawn while managing a full-time role. What’s one small discipline you could adopt in your own “margins” this week?
7. He writes, “Discipline isn’t doing more. It’s knowing what deserves your energy.” What currently deserves less of your energy?
8. What did you learn about AI’s nature as a predictive tool versus a conscious thinker in this chapter?
9. Ryan says, “If you’re not actively training your stack – your mindset, your process, your edge – you’re not in the fight.” What part of your “stack” needs training right now?
10. After Round One, what mindset shift feels most urgent for you to implement tomorrow?

Round Two

Know Your Weight Class

1. Ryan says, “You don’t get leverage by pretending to be someone else.” Where in your life are you pretending instead of owning your truth?
2. The Jamaican proverb “One one coco full basket” speaks to small efforts compounding. What is your current ‘coco’ that you’re adding daily?
3. What part of your work drains your energy yet provides little return?
4. When you think of your “weight class,” what does that metaphor represent in your career or life right now?
5. The chapter states, “You can’t outsource your thinking.” How does this challenge your current approach to tools and delegation?
6. Ryan shares about getting fired from a warehouse job after ghostriding a forklift. What’s a time you self-sabotaged out of misalignment with your true purpose?
7. Dr. Joy Buolamwini reminds us AI reflects its training data. Where in your life or work do you need to examine bias in your assumptions or inputs?
8. How do you distinguish between tasks that amplify your edge versus those that dilute it?
9. Audre Lorde said, “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.” What does self-preservation look like for you?
10. If you lost 90% of your work memory, what three tasks would you rebuild first, and why?

Round Three

Tools Don't Win Fights

1. "Access isn't the edge. Application is." How are you currently applying your tools versus just possessing them?
2. Where are you confusing movement with momentum in your workflow?
3. Basquiat didn't wait to master traditional tools before creating. Where are you waiting for permission or perfection before moving forward?
4. Ryan writes, "AI is the brush. Taste is the hand." What does taste mean to you in your field?
5. Have you experienced AI outputting "confident nonsense"? How do you discern signal from noise?
6. Kendrick Lamar's 'DNA' is highlighted for its raw precision. What aspect of your work carries that level of intentionality?
7. Where in your life are you scaling something you haven't vetted for quality or fit?
8. How would your daily work change if you prioritized taste over efficiency?
9. Ryan says tools don't make you better – they make you more of what you already are. What does this reveal about your current approach to AI or technology?
10. What single area could benefit most from you applying taste instead of defaulting to generic output?

Round Four

Design For Leverage

1. Ryan writes, “You’re not tired because you’re lazy. You’re tired because your system is broken.” Does this resonate with your life right now?
2. Temple Grandin turned empathy into leverage. Where have your sensitivities become strengths?
3. The author says, “A great system is a silent assassin.” What part of your workflow could operate silently on your behalf?
4. How do you define ‘leverage’ in your personal or professional life?
5. Solange’s ‘Cranes in the Sky’ is described as a systems warning. What are you trying to outrun through busyness or productivity hacks?
6. Ryan built prompt libraries and internal tools to multiply himself. What could you build this week to create similar leverage?
7. Where are you confusing systems with dashboards or pretty tools that don’t actually reduce friction?
8. What’s one area in your life where engineered clarity could replace brute force?
9. The chapter mentions not automating what drains you but automating what dilutes you. What’s one task that dilutes your focus that you can automate?
10. Which output currently requires the most effort per unit of impact, and how could you invert that ratio?

Round Five

Find the Signal

1. Ryan writes, “You’re not drowning in work. You’re drowning in noise.” Where is noise most present in your life right now?
2. Emily Dickinson’s poems whispered but lingered. What is a small truth you’ve spoken that had lasting impact?
3. How do you currently distinguish between signal and static in your communication?
4. The chapter says AI exposes how many people were faking clarity. Where do you see this play out in your industry?
5. Ryan shares his ‘Signal Stack’ process. What step could you adopt to sharpen your own communication?
6. When was the last time you cut something you loved because it didn’t serve the signal?
7. The author writes, “In a world of infinite noise, the clearest voice wins.” What’s one area you need to cut words to increase clarity?
8. Shirley Chisholm said, “We must reject not only the stereotypes others have of us but also those we have of ourselves.” What stereotype about yourself do you need to reject to communicate more powerfully?
9. What’s one idea you’ve overcomplicated, and how would it sound if you said it with perfect clarity?
10. Dickinson didn’t need permission for her words to matter. Where are you waiting for permission to express your truth?

Round Six

Work Like a Team of Ten

1. Ryan writes, “You’re not lazy. You’re not disorganized. You’re just still operating like a team of one in a world that demands you move like ten.” Where does this feel true for you?
2. James Baldwin never sounded alone. What gives your voice force beyond your individual effort?
3. Where are you trying to do everything yourself when you could assign roles to tools or systems?
4. Ryan says he doesn’t just use AI – he assigns it. What AI tools could you assign as “roles” in your current workflow?
5. Dr. Rumman Chowdhury says AI reflects your chaos unless you lead it. Where does your current system reflect chaos instead of clarity?
6. Which part of your workflow still depends entirely on you, and how could you systematize it without losing quality?
7. The chapter highlights clarity of voice as more important than headcount. How can you sharpen your voice this week?
8. Pusha T’s lyrics emphasize clean, precise moves. What’s one area in your life where you need to switch from broadcasting to transmitting?
9. Audre Lorde wrote, “I’m deliberate and afraid of nothing.” Where could you move more deliberately right now?
10. If your presence is amplified by infrastructure, what infrastructure do you need to build to extend your impact?

Round Seven

Cut With Precision

1. Ryan writes, “You’re carrying a ghost.” What old identity or habit is slowing you down right now?
2. The chapter states, “Focus is the sharpest leverage.” What part of your focus is currently diluted by distractions?
3. Marie Kondo asked, “Does this spark joy?” – Ryan reframes this as self-respect at scale. What in your life no longer sparks clarity or alignment?
4. What is one project or commitment you would not build again today?
5. Where are you keeping something out of loyalty rather than impact?
6. Annie Clark (St. Vincent) says, “I have to destroy what I’ve made in order to make the next thing.” What do you need to destroy or release to evolve?
7. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie says, “What you don’t let go of is killing you slowly.” What is killing your momentum right now?
8. Ryan deleted 40 songs that no longer felt true. What could you delete today to create space for what’s real?
9. Where are you editing for efficiency instead of editing for evolution?
10. What story, system, or identity are you still carrying that no longer serves the version of you you’re becoming?

Round Eight

Make Your Presence Felt

1. Nina Simone defined freedom as “no fear.” Where is fear dimming your presence today?
2. Ryan writes, “Presence is power. But not the kind measured in volume.” How do you define presence in your life?
3. Claude Cahun fought Nazis with surrealist art. How can you use your gifts as a form of resistance or empowerment?
4. The “blazer phase” experiment changed Ryan’s interactions. What small experiment could you run to shift how you’re perceived?
5. What does your current setup say about your priorities and self-respect?
6. Gustave Flaubert advised being well-ordered in life to be fierce and original in work. Where could you create more order to fuel your creativity?
7. What is one ritual you could establish this week to anchor your presence?
8. Ryan writes, “Setup is self-respect.” Where have you been disrespecting your future self by not setting up systems?
9. If you disappeared for a week, what setup would ensure you still create impact?
10. What would it look like to design your presence so intentionally that you don’t need to speak to be felt?

Round Nine

Drop the Sandbags

1. Angela Davis said, “I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change. I am changing the things I cannot accept.” What is one thing you need to stop accepting today?
2. Ryan shares about quitting smoking and losing 100 pounds after his mother’s death. What is one change you’ve postponed that could transform your life?
3. Where are you still wearing armor that once protected you but now holds you back?
4. What identity or role did you once need that is no longer necessary?
5. How do you distinguish growth from betrayal of your past self?
6. Ryan writes, “Letting go isn’t weakness. It’s reverence.” How can you honor a past version of yourself by letting it rest?
7. What belief about yourself no longer holds up under scrutiny, and why are you still holding it?
8. What would it feel like to run without dragging your ghosts behind you?
9. Where are you confusing exhaustion with proof of worth?
10. What sandbag can you drop today to move with more alignment and less drag?

Round Ten

Play Offense, Not Defense

1. James Baldwin wrote, “Freedom is something people take.” Where do you need to take freedom instead of waiting for it to be given?
2. Ryan writes, “Offense means deciding what matters – and hitting it before the world hijacks your focus.” What could you hit first tomorrow morning?
3. Octavia Butler didn’t wait to be chosen. Where are you waiting to be chosen when you could initiate instead?
4. Where in your life are you playing cleanup crew instead of leading with intention?
5. The chapter discusses psychological safety as the birthplace of innovation. How can you create more psychological safety for yourself or others?
6. Ryan’s “Offense Stack” includes starting screenless and leading with outbound assets. What would your offense stack look like?
7. Where does defense feel productive but actually keeps you small?
8. What one outbound action could you take this week to shift from passive to proactive?
9. Ryan writes, “Make the first move.” What is the first move you’ve been avoiding?
10. What would it look like to design your day around offense rather than reaction?

Round Eleven

Build Your Corner

1. Ryan writes, “Your corner is not a luxury. It’s a strategy.” Who is currently in your corner, and how do they strengthen you?
2. The chapter emphasizes designing your corner intentionally. What role is missing in your current support system?
3. Where are you overvaluing self-sufficiency and undervaluing interdependence?
4. The author shares about his father’s quiet dignity and mother’s resilience. Whose example has shaped your own grit?
5. Audre Lorde said, “Without community, there is no liberation.” What does community mean to you right now?
6. Ryan writes, “Your system is your corner.” What part of your system needs reinforcement?
7. Where do you need to ask for help but pride is holding you back?
8. Who do you support as part of their corner, and how does that reciprocal energy fuel your fight?
9. What is one conversation you need to have this week to strengthen your corner?
10. What would it look like to build a corner so strong that you can fight bigger fights with less fear?

Round Twelve

Go the Distance

1. Ryan writes, “Endurance isn’t just stamina. It’s alignment under pressure.”
Where are you out of alignment despite enduring?
2. What does “going the distance” mean in your current season of life?
3. The chapter emphasizes rhythm over brute force. Where are you relying too much on force and not enough on rhythm?
4. Muhammad Ali said, “Only a person who knows what it is like to be defeated can reach down to the bottom of their soul and come up with the extra ounce of power it takes to win.” What past defeat fuels your current fight?
5. Ryan writes about running lakefront miles in grief. What ritual helps you keep moving when life feels heavy?
6. What would it look like for you to finish this year with no regrets about your effort or focus?
7. The chapter talks about fighting smarter, not just harder. Where could you fight smarter starting tomorrow?
8. Where do you need to trust your training instead of questioning your readiness?
9. What do you need to let go of to conserve energy for what matters most?
10. After reading this book, what is the single most important mindset shift you will carry forward into your life?

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