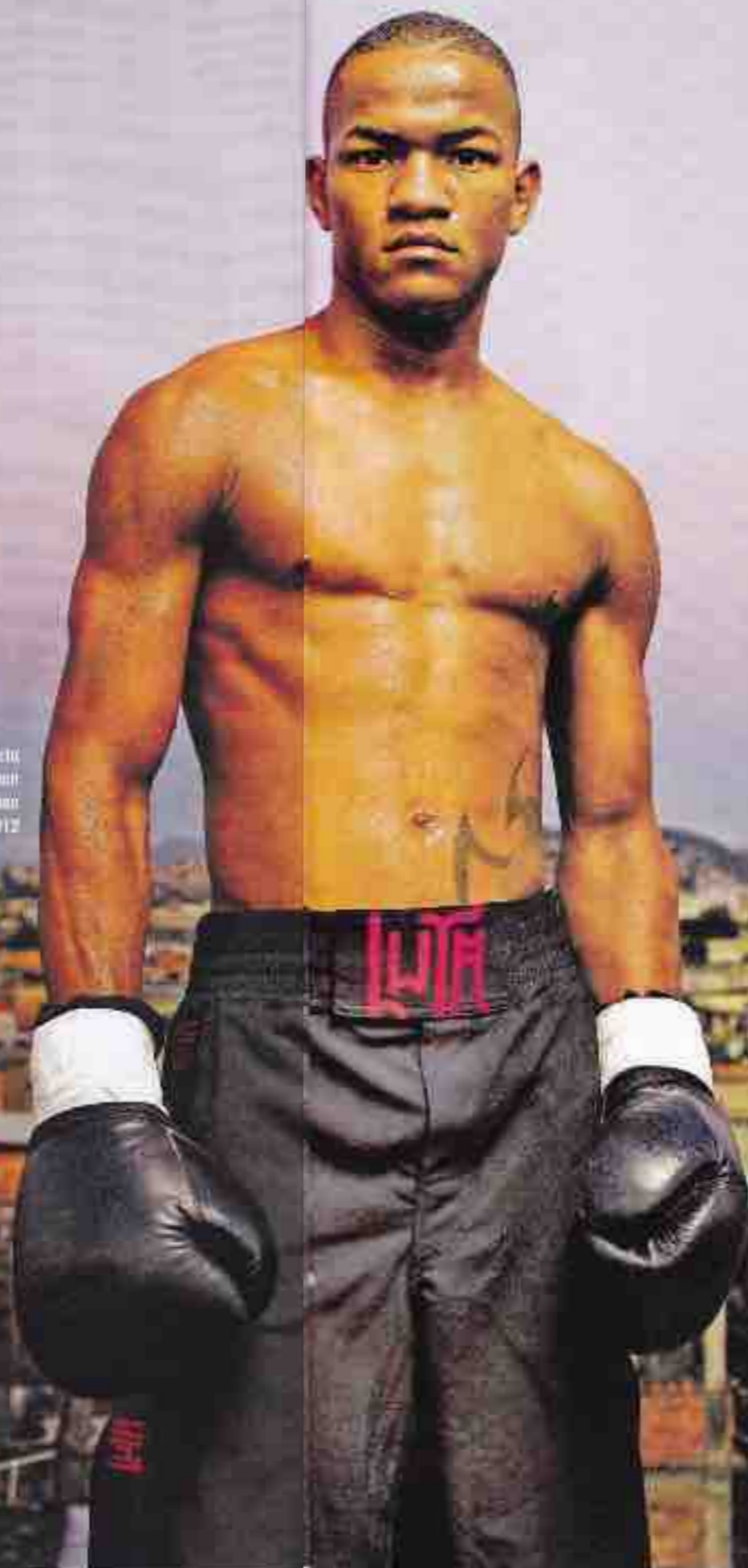


# Fight for Peace in the FAVELA

THE HERO ACADEMY'S star pupil Roberto Casado is a former national champion who still hopes to make the Brazilian Olympic team for London 2012



**MATTHEW OGBORN** discovers how boxing is being used to wean the youth of the Brazilian slums off a life of drugs and crime thanks to the efforts of Briton Luke Dowdney

“I was walking in the *favela*, going on a date with a girl, and I turned round the corner and bumped into a bloke holding an M16 rifle. He looked at me and said: ‘Sorry.’ I was totally freaked out about this guy holding a gun apologising to me, no aggression at all”

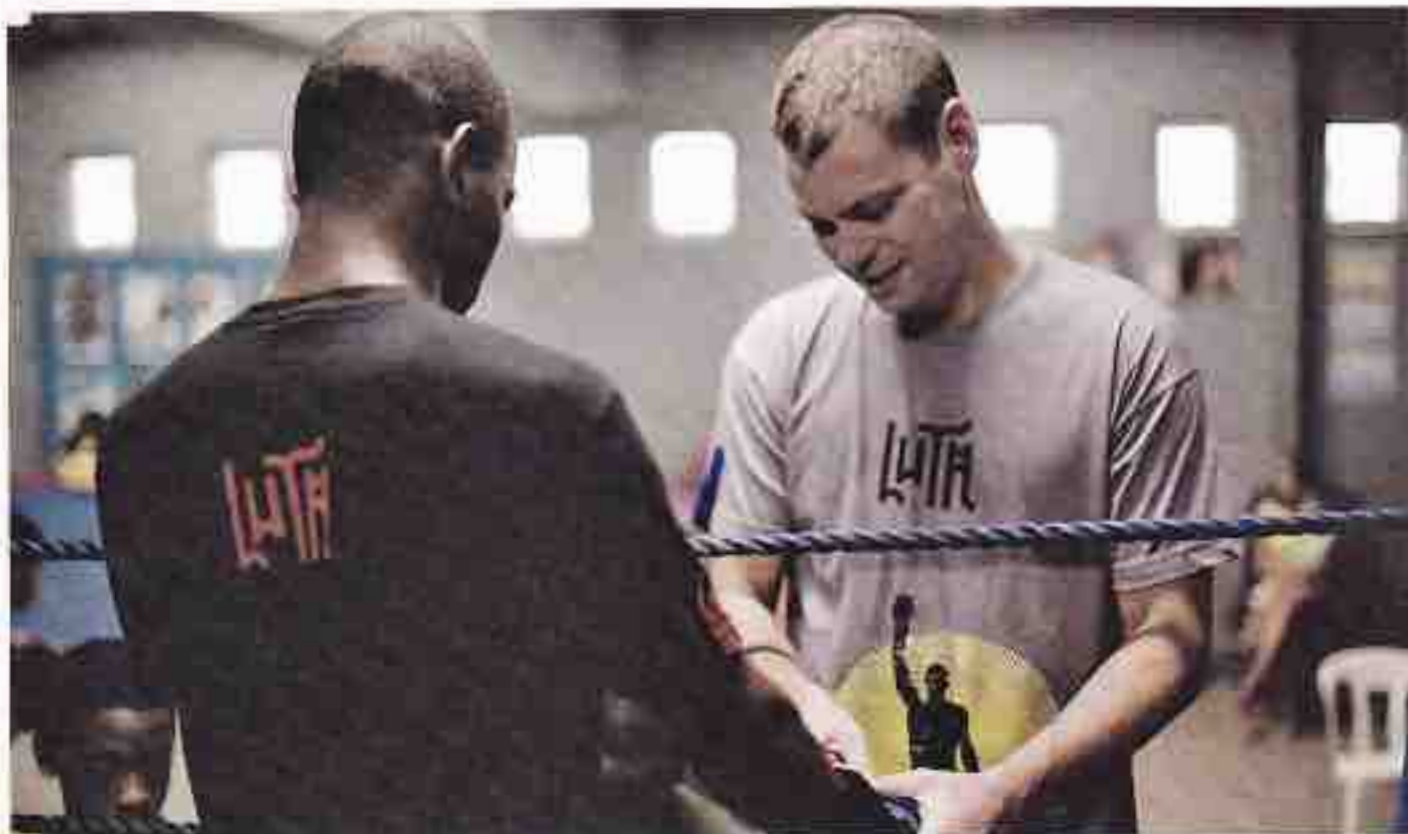
LUKE DOWDNEY, FOUNDER OF FIGHT FOR PEACE

**A** amateur boxing gave **Luke Dowdney** a purpose in life during his late teens and early 20s. Now, though, it is the **Fight for Peace** academies he has set up in Rio de Janeiro and London that drive him. The progress he has made in empowering young people to better themselves over the last decade led to an MBE in 2009 and the chance to spread his gospel further.

The attitude Dowdney experienced as a middle-class childhood that was plagued by bullying, which led him to lace up the gloves to confront his tormentors rather than retreat further into himself, as happens with so many victims. Even though he came late into the amateur game at the University of Edinburgh, he won the British Universities light-middleweight title. Unfortunately, two “minor” brain bleeds cut his career short just when he was beginning to flourish. Determined to stay in boxing, Dowdney worked on securing his coaching badges.

“I was really badly bullied at school and I had a lot of anger in me,” he said. “I think boxing was a good channel for that. I boxed 15 or so months and then I had a minor brain haemorrhage. I went, and boxed again, as you know what it is like when you love something, and it happened more seriously. I was absolutely gutted as I loved the sport, but **Fight for Peace** was born of that.”

“I was studying in Brazil and working as a volunteer for a non-governmental association called *Viva Rio*. I was doing international fundraising and youth violence stuff, which is where my dissertation was based (he holds a master's degree in social anthropology). It seemed weird to get to these kids that were getting into the most harm. I was walking in a *favela* in slum town going on a date with a girl and I turned round the corner and bumped into a bloke holding what I later found out to be an M16 [rifle]. He looked at me and went ‘sorry.’”



BRAZILIAN PRO BOXING does not have a fantastic reputation, but Dowdney *above* hopes to create more fighters such as Éder Jofre and Acelino Freitas

"I was totally freaked out about this guy holding a gun apologising to me, because all that street gangsterism in America and England is really aggressive. I started looking into it and learnt about drug factions controlling the favelas, which led me to write a book called *Children of the Drug Trade*. I negotiated with the top dons and I was given access to their soldiers, who I was allowed to interview and take photos of. I had a guide, but he left me on my own in the middle of these favelas and they were armed and doing coke.

"It was scary at times, but led to a much better understanding of why these kids were getting involved with this stuff. I said to my boss: I can't box any more, but I've got my coaching licence and one way we could get to these kids is by opening a gym, a social project if you like."

Starting out with 10 kids, Dowdney has since nurtured the Complexo da Maré academy into a groundbreaking operation that employs 45 full-time staff. He added: "We have the Five Pillars, an integrated approach combining boxing and martial arts with education programmes, job training schemes, mentoring and youth leadership, which came about by working and listening to what they needed.

"Boxing is absolutely key because, firstly, it attracts them and, secondly, it is a platform to build on top of the traditional youth work and education structure getting kids back into the job trade. Of those first 10 kids that joined, five are no longer with us on this earth due to gang violence."

Outside of the likes of bantam/featherweight great Éder Jofre and hard-hitting super feather/lightweight Acelino Freitas, Brazil is not known for producing top boxing talent. It's something Dowdney is fighting hard to correct. "There is not much money in Brazilian pro boxing," he said. "You need to be in Miami like Popo [Freitas]. God, he could bang. He is a lovely guy and chose our gym to stage his last training session before his last-ever fight, but then the fight got called off. He was still living in a favela when he won the WBO super feather title [in 1999]. He went home and slept in a favela after that and became a hero in Brazil."

Dowdney believes that his star Rio pupil, Roberto Custódio, could still sneak into the Olympics. National welterweight

champion Custódio had to settle for bronze in the recent defence of his title, but other boxers from the Rio Academy secured a gold and silver at the same meeting.

Meanwhile, back in the U.K., Dowdney's North Woolwich academy has already helped countless kids since 2007, the 12 full-time staff working wonders inside the ring and classroom.

It is Dowdney's new clothing line, LUTA, which could hold the key to the promised land of a self-sufficient fight for Peace that does not need to rely on charitable donations. Dowdney, who won the prestigious Sport for Good Award at the 2007 Laureus World Sports Awards, is so enthused by LUTA's impact thus far that his dream of taking on the big guns in the sportswear market is not as far-fetched as it might seem. Hollywood star Idris Elba (who played gangster Stringer Bell in the excellent TV series *The Wire*) lent his voice and presence to the launch for free, while a Covent Garden pop-up shop proved successful instantly.

With a thriving online sales presence, too, Dowdney said: "I wanted to design a range of performance fight wear that is better than anything out there, that could also be training wear for people that just go to gyms.

"We interviewed 300 fighters online and through workshop groups, from professionals through to high-level amateurs who live and breathe their sport. Three things came out. Number one was freedom of movement, as they were getting restricted by the clothes they were in. You'll often see amateur boxers tape up the back of their shirt, because it holds it tight. Otherwise it can slip down. Secondly, temperature control. As a lot of clothing, especially in the mixed martial arts world, is using textiles that are designed for other sports. It's [standard MMA wear] got neoprene in it, which makes you sweat and is really unpleasant. Thirdly, durability, which is a big issue.

"I want LUTA to represent kids like Roberto. The reality is most of the kids in London and Rio don't get involved in violence. It's only a small amount that do. I want people to get behind the idea of our motto, Real Strength."

An ambitious dream that Dowdney is intent on realising. **Read more about the projects at <http://www.fightforpeace.net> and <http://www.luta.co.uk>.**