If the title of the “smartest tough guy” on Earth could go to anybody, Andy Costello has a pretty good case to make. At the very least, he can claim that incongruous moniker in European territory.

Costello is one of the world’s top chess boxers, recently besting Italian Gianluca Sirci to take the European heavyweight championship. After alternating between bouts of boxing and brief battles at the chess board, Costello defeated Sirci by checkmate in the fifth round.

“Inevitably, it’s going to have an effect on your concentration,” said Costello of the sport that demands an unlikely mix of concussion readiness and tactical alertness.

“It’s hard to concentrate, isn’t it, if someone’s playing a stereo? So imagine someone punching you about the head. It’s going to be even harder.”

Costello, a former cop from Devon in England, came to the fledgling sport in 2008, after training for years in mixed-martial-arts.

“Even the cut and thrust of full-on fights can become mundane,” said the 45-year-old. “When you combine chess with boxing, the way it flows makes it exciting and fun to watch.”

Invention of the sport is credited to French cartoonist Enki Bilal, who described chess boxing in a 1992 comic book. The sport started gaining steam in Britain in the 1990s, and now has broken into Europe and parts of North America.

It’s exactly what you’d imagine. Two boxers duke it in the ring and then sit down for four minutes of chess before returning to punch each other.

The winner is decided by knockout, referee’s decision or checkmate.

Costello said that some chessboxers are clearly stronger in one area of the sport. Earlier this year, he was competing against a “chess master” from Italy, who was dominating the board game component of their match.

“He was gradually heading towards a win, but I managed to knock him out in the fourth round,” said Costello.

He said chessboxing is growing as a spectator sport, but would like to see it gain some respect. The most-watched matches, he said, are those with the most potential for humour.

“To see two nerds swinging handbaglike punches, trying to hit each other … Those matches tend to be the most popular, somewhat annoyingly for me.”