

Laila Ali, the greatest too?

Written by Robert Cassidy Jr.

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The novelty that is Laila Ali was worn off. So much so that HBO will not even televise her bout from Madison Square Garden on Nov. 11, when she fights underneath the Wladimir Klitschko-Calvin Brock heavyweight title fight.

Ali is no longer a curiosity. She can no longer get by on her name and the resemblance – in and out of the ring – to her dad. What she is now is so much more important than what she was at one time. Laila Ali is now the face, the heart and the soul of women's boxing.

The future of her sport rests on her broad shoulders. She is the only star left in women's boxing. And while she has resigned herself to talking about HBO's refusal to televise her fight, she'd rather just be fighting. But heck, Jackie Tonawanda, known in her day as the Female Ali, once sued the New York State Athletic Commission just for a chance to fight in the Garden.

"I'm not spending much time talking about HBO," she said on a conference call Wednesday. "I'll talk about it because I have to. That's a little upsetting. People will have to come to the Garden to see me fight. I'm still going to do what I do. The last name Ali is very powerful. I have all my dad's fans with me."

What she does is fight, and she does it well. She is tall, quick-fisted, athletic and strong. Many of the same adjectives used once to describe her father. Ali has a 22-0 record after turning pro without a single amateur fight. She's currently the WBC super middleweight champion.

She has also been training with Floyd Mayweather Sr. and her defense will be vastly improved for this fight.

Ali will make her Garden debut 35 years after her father's Fight of the Century against Joe Frazier. Muhammad Ali last fought in the Garden in 1977, beating Earnie Shavers. Muhammad fought at the old and new Garden a total of eight times.

"I'm excited to be fighting at the Garden," she said. "Obviously, it's the Mecca of boxing. And especially with my father and the fights he put on there, I can't wait to get into that ring."

But she wasn't too sentimental about the famous building. She said she once attended a Lennox Lewis fight there and "just assumed I would" be fighting there.

"I don't really get the same feeling a lot of people might get walking into the Garden," she said.

She expects to her father to attend the fight. "He's planning on attending," she said. "It will be extra special for him to come watch me fight at the Garden."

When asked what he said to her, she answered, "He says he loves me and misses me."

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Ali will defend her WBC super middleweight title against No. 3-ranked Shelley Burton, who is 8-2-1.

“She’s a tough fighter,” said Ali, of her opponent. “I have seen her fight once. She’s true to the sport. I think she believes she can win the fight. Which is good. But I don’t lose, that’s not what I do. I think it will be a good fight until I stop her. Every time people fight me, they come 10 times harder because of who I am.”

Because of who she is, people will take notice on Nov. 11. Because of who she is and what she does in the ring, she has the ability to bring her sport into the mainstream. Even if it’s just for a night in the Big Apple.

Ali, 28, may go down as the greatest female boxer in history. Her decisive win over Christy Martin doesn’t count for much in this corner. Ali had tremendous advantages in age and natural weight, the fight was a mere money grab for both fighters (and good for them.). In her prime, Martin was a complete fighter. She was the genuine article. Ali appears to be as well. She just needs a stage.

“Any time I go into the ring, I have to make a statement because of who I am,” she said.

Her father made this statement often throughout his career, “I am the greatest.”

Perhaps one day we’ll be saying the same thing about Laila.