

Laila Ali Plans to Quit Boxing after O'Neil Fight...Unless

Written by David A. Avila
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Deep in concentration, Laila Ali fires multiple combinations at the pair of boxing mitts held by her trainer Floyd Mayweather inside the Las Vegas boxing gym.

It sounds like a machine gun firing bullets.

After Ali finishes her work out she sits down on the side of the ring to explain that following her next bout against Gwen O'Neil, in Africa on Feb. 3, she will be hanging up the boxing gloves. The super middleweight world champion plans to marry and have children.

"It's something I've wanted to do. I'm 29," said Ali, who is engaged to former NFL star receiver Curtis Conway. "

So what about Ann Wolfe, Leatitia Robinson and the others? Will any of them ever fight each other?

"I've tried many times to get them in the ring," said Ali, who is fighting O'Neil for the second time after Leatitia Robinson pulled out. "If they don't want to fight then that's it."

Since 2002 the milieu of female prizefighters has challenged Ali to a prizefight. But other than Christy Martin, who was much smaller, the other challengers have not come forth.

"In the beginning everyone wanted to fight me. I told them let me learn how to box first then we can meet," says Ali, whose father is heavyweight great Muhammad Ali. "The girls I was beating my first year I was beating just on athletic ability."

Aided by natural athleticism, Ali acquired instant boxing fame because of her father and the natural beauty that has made her a favorite of fashion magazines and other commercial ventures. She quickly became the most famous and marketable female prizefighter today.

A slew of boxing's best trainers like Dub Huntley, Roger Mayweather and now Floyd have molded her into an undefeated fighting machine who has ventured between middleweight to light heavyweight using her speed, power and grit.

Other fighters have emerged to challenge Ali, but since 2000, when she faced Kendra Lenhart in a rousing slugfest, the real superfigths have not emerged.

But one name remains on the lips of many people as the answer to Ali and her name is Ann Wolfe, the hard-hitting slugger from Texas.

Wolfe, Egbunine and Robinson

Wolfe, 35, built her reputation on some earth-shattering knockouts including the first round

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blowout of the much taller heavyweight world champion Vonda Ward two years ago. But the boxing fans of female prizefighting have yet to see Wolfe and Ali in the same ring.

"Both girls have to understand that the kind of money they want is just not there," said Brian Young of Prize Fight Promotions that promotes Wolfe. "Maybe a few years ago it was there, but not any more."

Since 2003 when ESPN considered matching the two middleweight champions, both Ali and Wolfe's teams were unable to agree to terms.

First Ali's team wanted to build up the fight in effort to make more money. Absolut Promotions matched Ali against Christy Martin and put Wolfe in against former opponent Valerie Mahfood, who once stopped her by knockout. The event took place in Mississippi and drew a sold out crowd. In addition, more than 100,000 people bought the pay-per-view televised fight card.

"We were trying to build the fight up between me and Ann Wolfe," said Ali who stopped Martin while Wolfe beat Mahfood by decision. "She (Wolfe) didn't want the fight."

Fans have been perplexed that the two most famous fighters in the middleweight division have not met. Some blame Wolfe some blame Ali who is no longer with Absolut Promotions.

"People saw Ann Wolfe go on ESPN and say that I didn't want to fight her. A lot of people believed her," says Ali. "I've been trying to fight that woman for the last three years."

Last November, Ali was about to step in the ring with fast-rising light heavyweight Ijeoma Egbunine. The Nigeria fighter was turning the heads of many boxing experts with her explosive wins over Valerie Mahfood and Asa Sandell.

Within a week of the fight, fan buildup began to simmer for the fight between the two female fighters that was going to take place at Madison Square Garden. Would this be Ali's defining moment?

Contracts drawn

The terms were specified and contracts drawn up and it looked like a showdown between the two female boxers was a lock, but Egbunine backed out due to 27 pages of legalities involved in a prizefight.

"Ijeoma thought her contract was different from mine," said Ali. "I got the same 27 pages but her team felt she was getting something different."

Kerry Smith, who promotes Egbunine, said the money just wasn't right.

"Getting 10 percent of what Laila Ali makes just isn't going to cut it," said Smith.

Egbunine dropped out of the fight against Ali at Madison Square Garden and was replaced by

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middleweight contender Shelley Burton. Ali boxed with her three rounds before unleashing a barrage of punches that forced Burton to turn her back. The referee stepped in and stopped the fight for a technical knockout victory.

Meanwhile, Egbunine accepted a fight with Laura Ramsey earlier this month in Hollywood, Florida.

She was floored two times before Ramsey knocked her out for good in the third and final knockdown. The potential showdown with Ali blew away like so much dust.

With Wolfe seemingly out of the picture – her last fight was in August against Lisa Ested in a six round decision win – because of financial differences with her promoters, only one other fighter seems capable presenting a marquee match up: Leatitia Robinson.

There is one problem, however. Robinson is getting married on Valentine's Day and will take time off. The problem is how long will that take?

"If I have a baby then I take time off," said Robinson, who plans to live in Kenya with her husband for a while. "Or I might just go right back into training."

Robinson, 26, a female prizefighter who has 18 years experience as an amateur and as a pro, sought a match with Ali, Wolfe and Egbunine. None have materialized.

"I never get burned out from fighting but from the lack of fighting," said Robinson by telephone. "Nine out of 10 times they aren't paying me enough money."

Though only five feet seven inches in height, Robinson has more boxing experience than Ali, Wolfe and Egbunine.

"Ann Wolfe, I'm not taking anything away from her, but the first time I fought Valerie Mahfood who gave her all these problems in two fights, I beat the braids off of her," said Robinson about a proposed bout between herself and Wolfe. "If they (Wolfe's promoters) want to fight me then lets make it fair. They want to bring me down to \$2,500 and pay her \$100,000. That's being used without Vaseline."

Julie Landsdown, who manages Robinson, said they seek 40 percent of the purse to fight Ali. For a fight in Africa an offer of \$2,500 was refused. Ali's share was an alleged \$100,000.

"We just want a general percentage of what Ali makes. We know she is the big name," said Landsdown. "Leatitia is usually the higher paid fighter on any card."

On Saturday Ali will take on O'Neil, the number two super middleweight in the female division, and will probably repeat her victory. After that, nobody knows, because then two weeks later Robinson will be married and Ali intends to marry in April and possibly quit for good.

"My next fight will be my last fight for a while," said Ali who is days away from defending her title

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against O'Neil. "Ijeoma, Leatitia and Wolfe have used up all the excuses."

Ali then picked up her carrying bag and walked out of the Las Vegas boxing gym. Outside she packs her SUV with her equipment and stops for a moment to add one more statement.

"I've tried to fight them girls," Ali says. "If they aren't scared they have a chance to make some money. After that I may not come back."