

The Best Female Boxers Take Center Stage

Written by David A. Avila

Tuesday, 10 June 2008 19:00

About a dozen teens are playing basketball inside the shadowy Hollenbeck Gym in East Los Angeles as the petite figure of Wendy Rodriguez walks through the large double doors.

She walks up a platform where a boxing gym is located and begins wrapping her own hands to the puzzlement of the gawking wannabe Kobe Bryants.

A few mutter to each other. She's a curiosity.

Although Rodriguez has fought for nine years professionally and has captured a couple of world titles, she remains unknown in a town that covets its boxing champions. But it's different for women whose fights aren't publicized.

"It's really hard to get fights for women," said Freddie Roach, one of the world's most famous boxing trainers who tutors Rita Valentini, Ana Julaton and Elizabeth Quevedo.

On Thursday and Friday for the first time in history back-to-back female boxing cards will be televised from Connecticut and New Mexico.

The International Female Boxers Association, a sanctioning organization, is working at a rapid pace to break the ropes holding back female boxing and is pushing hard to support both shows on Thursday, June 12 and Friday, June 13.

"Both dates work out well to have the championship fights," said Judy Kulis, president of the IFBA, which was formed in 1997. "It's a one-two attack."

If you like to watch female boxing it's a virtual smorgasborg with the first show taking place at Mohegan Sun Casino and televised by FSN.

"The whole reason we did the Fox Sports Net is to promote the pay-per-view on the next night," Kulis said.

On Friday, six female bouts, including four world titles, will take place at the Isleta Casino and Resort in Albuquerque. It will be shown on pay-per-view worldwide.

"What people are going to see is an incredible array of talent," said Kulis, who supported an all-female fight card at Pechanga earlier this year. "Women fight with a lot of passion."

Here's a breakdown of the two fight cards that boxing fans can watch this week:

Connecticut card

IFBA junior featherweight titleholder Lisa Brown (14-3-3) of Canada defends her belt against

The Best Female Boxers Take Center Stage

Written by David A. Avila
Tuesday, 10 June 2008 19:00

slick and quick Alicia Ashley (14-7-1), who fights out of New York. This fight should last all 10 rounds.

New York City's Jill Emery (8-2) meets Dallas's Angelica Martinez (6-4-1) for the vacant IFBA welterweight title.

In a featherweight match, Kansas City bomber Jeri "Fists of Fury" Sitzes is scheduled to go six rounds with Ela "Bam Bam" Nunez of Jamestown, New York. Sitzes is a rugged boxer who lost a somewhat controversial title fight to Lisa Brown earlier in the year. Nunez is a powerful hitter who knocked out the dangerous Brooke Dierdorff in the fifth round last March.

Perhaps the most exciting fights will come from a pair of Las Vegas fighters, Melinda Cooper and Elena Reid.

Cooper (18-0, 10 KOs) faces Donna Bigger (19-7-1, 16 KOs) a knockout artist from South Carolina. Both are big punchers, but Cooper is incredibly fast and aggressive. She's the much shorter fighter but her speed makes the difference in most of her fights.

In a flyweight bout, "Baby Doll" Reid faces Ava Knight of California in a six-round bout. The Las Vegas fighter was supposed to defend her IFBA title but her original opponent had visa problems and three other opponents dropped out as contenders.

"We wanted a title fight but it just didn't work out," said Reid. "I've been training so hard, I just wanted any fight."

New Mexico card

Holly Holm is the box office attraction in New Mexico and the star of the fight card, but can she beat Michigan's undefeated Mary Jo Sanders?

Holm (21-1-2, 6 KOs) defends her IFBA junior middleweight title against Sanders (25-0, 8 KOs), who has the IBA middleweight title but is dropping down one weight division for this contest. It's a fight that has been in the works for over a year.

The title fight pits two female boxers who are considered among the top pugilists in the world.

"Holly Holm draws crowds," Kulis said.

Both Sanders and Holm have sought that career-defining fight that could catapult them to stardom. This fight can help accomplish that goal.

"It's not just another fight, this is for pound for pound supremacy," said Sanders during a telephone conference call. "We've been working to the nth degree and then some for this fight."

Holm admits to being equally excited and nervous, though she's the hometown favorite.

The Best Female Boxers Take Center Stage

Written by David A. Avila
Tuesday, 10 June 2008 19:00

"I feel ready, I'm nervous," said Holm. "I do know this is a huge fight, the biggest fight of my career."

Both are considered two of the finest female boxers in the world and have several world championships between them.

Holm, a honey blonde fighter out of Albuquerque, has the classic boxing style that has catapulted her to several world titles in different weight divisions.

Sanders is an aggressive boxer-puncher from Detroit who ran out of opponents and sought a match to pit the best of the east with the best of the west.

"I think it's history-making," says Sanders about the entire fight card.

And it is.

Perhaps the most captivating match up aside from Holm-Sanders, will be Florida's Chevelle Hallback against Canada's Jeannine Garside for the vacant IFBA lightweight title. Hallback has been considered one of the top boxers in the world since she first started her career in 1997.

Hallback (26-5-2, 11 KOs), who formerly lived in Temecula, has engaged in several fights including last year's Fight of the Year when she beat Terri Blair in a rousing slugfest at Pechanga. The skillful Hallback loves a good scrap and always has fun inside the ring.

"She's a good fighter, she doesn't have as much experience as a pro," said Hallback about Garside. "But she has an extensive background as an amateur. I'm excited about it."

Garside (7-0-1) is a non-stop punching machine who combines strength with an aggressive pressure style that usually wears down opponents. But she's fighting a hard puncher in Hallback. This fight should be electric.

"I bring a high pace," admits Garside, who used to spar with Sanders. "I'm excited."

In a mini-flyweight battle Carina Moreno (17-1, 5 KOs) faces New York's Eileen Olszewski (5-0-1) for the vacant IFBA title. Moreno already has the WBC minimum weight title and is moving up for bigger competition.

Olszewski beat Reid earlier in the year and has the WIBA flyweight title. She's dropping down in weight to meet Moreno, who fights out of Northern California.

Back in East Los Angeles, Rodriguez is training for her rematch against Hollie Dunaway, who beat her last year. The scrappy and talented fighter works as a social worker at day. She just loves challenges.

"I've wanted this fight so bad," said Rodriguez, who lost a unanimous decision to Dunaway in St. Louis in March 2007. "She really did beat me that day. I wasn't able to do the things I

The Best Female Boxers Take Center Stage

Written by David A. Avila
Tuesday, 10 June 2008 19:00

normally do. I felt rusty.”

Rodriguez is also a mixed martial arts fighter and has stayed busy by fighting in both combat sports. She fought the legendary German boxer Regina Halmich, who is now retired. Two months ago she participated and won her first MMA fight.

“It’s really difficult to fight in both sports. You’re in a different position and more squared up in MMA. In boxing you’re more to the side with your stance,” said Rodriguez, who won her first MMA fight by imposing a rear naked choke on her opponent. “But I feel very good about this fight. I’m very anxious to fight Hollie Dunaway again.”

Female boxing fans are also very anxious about watching the fights this week.

“They’re going to see a passion unparalleled in most sports,” said Kulis who has seen the sport survive despite the lack of television exposure. “These women when they get an opportunity they’re going to provide action that fans don’t see in men’s boxing. It’s a type of boxing that’s quick and fast paced.”

Lenny Fresquez, who is promoting the New Mexico fight card, said that he’s attempting to set a spark that can fire up interest in women’s boxing.

“I’m putting my money where my mouth is,” said Fresquez about promoting female boxing.

Maybe after this weekend people won’t look so puzzled when a woman puts on the boxing gloves?