

Christy Martin/Deidre Gogarty Lured Her In

Written by Robert Mladinich
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Kasha Chamblin's less than idyllic childhood in Lafayette, Louisiana, resulted in her becoming an emancipated adult by the age of 13.

Through sheer will and determination, she managed to avoid the pitfalls that had befallen so many of her peers. She became a standout soccer player at Acadiana High School, which resulted in her being offered numerous college scholarships.

Trusting her instincts about knowing what was best for her, she opted to enlist in the United States Marine Corps instead.

She attained the rank of sergeant during her eight years of service, four of which were on active duty. Among many other military accomplishments, she was one of the first 15 women to go through the grueling School of Infantry.

Of those who embarked on that ultra-challenging curriculum, only 9 completed it. Not surprisingly, Chamblin was one of them.

She made Marine Corps history when she became the first ever female to teach the course to men. The same intensity that Chamblin brought to her military career, she now brings to her boxing career.

On Saturday, November 24th, at the Paragon Casino and Resort in Marksville, Louisiana, the 30-year-old Chamblin, 10-1 (5 KOS), will challenge the much more experienced Ada Velez, 15-3-2 (6 KOS) for the IBA junior featherweight title.

Saturday night couldn't come soon enough for the Fighting Marine.

"Ada is a southpaw who is very determined," said Chamblin. "I have the utmost respect for her and do not take her lightly. She had the decision stolen from her when she lost her (WIBA bantamweight) title to Anita Christensen. Ada has held titles for as long as I can remember. Physically I might be able to chop her down, but her mind will still be there. With a real fighter like her, that's hard to put down."

Like Chamblin, who has a 7 year old son named Gabriel, Velez also has a young son. That, says Chamblin, makes her even more formidable.

"This fight is my toughest to date, and it's not just because of Ada's boxing skills," said Chamblin, whose husband Josh is also a former Marine. "What makes her most dangerous is that she wants to leave her son a championship legacy."

Fifteen years ago, one would have been hard-pressed to believe that Chamblin's own destiny would have been to serve her country so proudly in the military, as well as her community so

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loyally through an array of altruistic endeavors.

Besides volunteering for lung cancer awareness campaigns, she is very active in the Toys for Tots Christmas program.

And from a strictly fistic perspective, Chamblin brings dignity and honor to the often maligned and ridiculed sport of female boxing.

“Where I come from, people work hard and play hard,” said Chamblin. “There was an oil boom here, so a lot of 16 and 17 year olds were making a \$100,000 a year offshore. They’d be on land for two weeks and spend all their money. A lot of them woke up at 34 and realized they had nothing.”

Chamblin said that she was lucky enough to have learned many of life’s hard lessons early enough in life to not have a police record. The biggest lesson she has learned was to follow her heart, even when it defied convention.

You need not talk to Chamblin for more than one minute to realize there is nothing conventional about her.

As sweet, feminine and stunningly beautiful as she is outside of the ring, she is relentless in her eagerness to push the limits of endurance in everything she does. She started boxing for much the same reason she joined the Marine Corps.

“I’m very hardheaded, stubborn and proud,” she said. “I joined the Marine Corps because that was the only branch of the service that didn’t want me. I felt it would be the most challenging.”

Onetime pro heavyweight prospect Beau Williford, who runs the Ragin’ Cajun Boxing Club in Lafayette, is Chamblin’s trainer and manager. He first met Chamblin when she had no boxing experience whatsoever, but had brought her overweight younger brother Max to his gym to rid him of some girth.

Max lived in Arkansas, but would stay with Chamblin and other family members during the summer.

Williford wasn’t initially interested in taking on such a reclamation project, but was very taken by Chamblin’s sense of duty to Max. Although she was his older sister, she acted more like a strict and sensible mother toward him.

Williford, who believes more than anything else in personal accountability, couldn’t help but be touched by her apparent decency and the inherent toughness that bubbled under her surface.

“When she brought Max to me, he was 13 years old, maybe 5’3” or 5’4” tall, and 180 pounds,” said Williford. “He was corn-fed, hog-fat, and ready to cook. He was as fat as two pigs.”

Through a harsh training regimen, Williford managed to get 50 pounds off of Max in 90 days.

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“After every round that he hit the speed bag or the heavy bag, I’d have him run a mile,” said Williford. “He told me he liked the training, but hated the running. That’s when Kasha started to run with him.”

What Williford didn’t initially realize was what a keen eye Chamblin was keeping on those training at the gym. Before long, she was determined to become a boxer herself.

Not long afterwards she found herself sparring with Deirdre Gogarty, whose legendary March 1996 battle with Christy Martin on the undercard of the Mike Tyson-Frank Bruno II pay-per-view extravaganza finally gave female boxing some mainstream respectability.

“That was like Bruce Lee saying to a student, ‘let me show you something,’” said Chamblin. “She pulled her punches, but they still hurt. She showed me enough for me to build upon, and took me under her wing.”

Ironically, Chamblin was still in the Marine Corps when Gogarty fought Martin. A bunch of her friends who were watching the fight implored her to join them when it quickly evolved into a classic battle that had the live crowd on its feet.

Chamblin, who had no inclinations toward boxing at the time, scoffed at them. “Call me when Tyson fights,” she said. “I don’t want to see two girls slapping.”

But that was then, and this is now. Chamblin regularly views Gogarty’s fights over and over, and says she always learns something new. Technically speaking, Chamblin doesn’t think there are any female fighters as flawless as Gogarty was.

“She put everything into it, just like I try to do,” said Chamblin. “Some days in the gym, you’ll punch hard but be slow. Maybe your footwork or timing will be off. But the day when everything comes together, when everything is tweaked, that is the day you get everything you put into boxing back out of it. There is no better feeling in the world.”

Because Gogarty is now a member of the Louisiana State Boxing Commission she said she doesn’t have the luxury to work with fighters the way she used to. But, she explained, while there are no shortage of fighters who have talent, few are willing to put forth the time and hard work to cultivate the talent.

“Kasha was willing to do that,” said Gogarty. “She’s worked hard for her success and deserves whatever success she achieves.”

In December 2006, Chamblin traveled to Berlin, Germany, to fight WIBF featherweight champion Ina Menzer, who was 15-0 at the time. Because Chamblin felt so listless that night, she couldn’t put anything together and was stopped in the eighth round.

“We knew going in that we would have to knock her out or win decisively,” said Chamblin. “I don’t know what happened to me. I was too timid and technical. I was really tired and was even yawning on my way into the ring. Maybe it was the moment of the situation, but I was so

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disappointed in myself.”

When asked if it could have been jet lag that exhausted her, Chamblin did not accept that as an explanation for her lethargy. She did say, however, that she would love the opportunity to fight Menzer “in a gym, behind closed doors.”

She believes that much of Menzer’s success comes from the fact that she has the opportunity to be a full-time fighter.

“Ina was surprised that I was married, was a mother, and had a full-time job besides training and doing volunteer work,” said Chamblin, who is employed as a legal assistant at the Glenn Armentor Law Firm in Lafayette.

“She goes away to train for months at a time, is sponsored by companies like Adidas, and makes big bucks every time she fights. She doesn’t do anything else, and couldn’t fathom how I did all that I do. In the United States, we (female boxers) are lucky to make a few bucks, so we do it for the heart of it more than the money.”

Williford realized he had a winner in Chamblin the first day she sparred with Gogarty. No matter what Gogarty threw at her, Chamblin wouldn’t give up.

“In her very first amateur fight, Kasha won the Gulf States championship,” said Williford. “In her second pro fight, I put her in with Dana Kendrick, who was 6-1. People told me I was nuts. Kasha knocked her out in 71 seconds.”

Williford, who packs equal amounts of muscle and positive energy into his burly frame, is not the least bit surprised by Chamblin’s success.

“She’s absolutely gorgeous, she’s got a great personality, and she fights like hell so the public really took a shine to her,” he explained. “Once you meet her or see her in the ring, it’s hard not to.”

Although Chamblin is very much her own woman, she attributes so much of her success to Williford and Gogarty, both of whom she considers the ultimate in role models.

“I read Laila Ali’s book and even she said she wanted to start boxing after seeing Deirdre and Christy Martin fight,” said Chamblin. “And Beau is everything I ever wanted as a father.”

(Ali’s book is entitled “Reach: Finding Strength, Spirit and Personal Power”).

Chamblin hopes that a win over Velez might help elevate the sport in some way. But as much as she’d like to see her own personal odyssey end with title belts around her streamlined waist, what she’d like even more to see is female boxing become an Olympic sport.

“That is the big puzzle piece that is missing,” she said. “That’s what is needed to bring female boxing where it deserves to be.”

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I once attended an annual Marine Corps birthday celebration. The guest of honor was P.X. Kelly, a former commandant in the Corps. He described the magnificent statue in Washington, D.C. that depicts a group of Marines raising the flag at Iwo Jima.

One of those men, a Native-American named Ira Hayes, is desperately extending his hands in a futile attempt to grip the flag pole. Although he was unable to reach it, the significance of his efforts was not lost by Kelly or anyone else who ever served in the Corps.

That, said Kelly, “showed that we must reach beyond our grasp, because it is easy to reach within her grasp.”

Chamblin has been reaching beyond her grasp long before she even understood the concept. She did it when she stayed on the straight and narrow as an impressionable teenager, during the dog days of Marine Corps training, and as a working mother, spouse and professional boxer.

“Successful boxers, just like Marines, don’t settle for being just OK,” she explained. “I’ve done so much with so little for so long that now, I believe, I can do anything with nothing.”

Moreover, she adds, “Life should not be a journey to the grave with the intention of arriving safely in an attractive and well-preserved body, but rather to skid in sideways, Champagne in one hand, strawberries in the other, body thoroughly used up, totally worn out and screaming WOO HOO – what a ride.”