

State Of Women's Boxing 2009

Written by David A. Avila

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On a daily basis Melinda Cooper puts on her workout clothes, boxing shoes and endures the rigors of training for professional prizefighting.

At, 23, the undefeated Cooper could very well be the most feared female boxer in the sport, but few outside of Las Vegas have seen her in action.

"I'm always willing to fight," said Cooper (19-0, 11 KOs), who lives and trains in Las Vegas. "It's been really hard to find anything this year. I really don't know why."

Cooper and the 400 or so other professional female fighters in the country are always in a two-way battle to find promoters willing to stage their bouts and opponents willing to travel to other states and other countries. It's a never-ending journey.

Unlike men, the female fighters rarely get television exposure.

Though only in her early 20s, Cooper has been boxing for more than 12 years as both an amateur and professional. Except for two fights, the feared boxer has breezed through competition and is anxiously waiting for a "big fight." Cooper is a big puncher among female fighters who rarely win by knockout. Winning by stoppage is as common as women dunking in basketball, especially fighting in two-minute rounds.

"Melinda will fight anybody from junior bantamweight to junior featherweight," said James Pena, who has been training Cooper since she was 11 years old. "We've looked all over. We even fought in France."

The sport of boxing was not kind to female prizefighters in 2008. In fact, it hasn't been kind for the past five years with fewer and fewer fights emerging for those women willing to engage.

"There's definitely been a drop off," says Pena, who searches worldwide for possible opportunities.

American female prizefighters only wish they could have parity with their European counterparts where women prizefighters like Germany's Regina Halmich, France's Anne Sophie Mathis and Bulgaria's Galina Koleva Ivanova are big draws and make substantial purses.

Fighting overseas, however, has its disadvantages. If an American boxer does not knock out the European boxer, then chances are it's going to end with a loss.

"You have to take it out of the hands of the judges," said Layla McCarter, who has fought overseas on numerous occasions. "When I fought in Canada I made sure I had at least one American judge."

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McCarter won by split-decision when she beat Jelena Mrdjenovich, a talented Canadian lightweight champion. But that was Canada.

Other female fighters have not fared well in Europe, such as Jeannine Garside who traveled to Bosnia and lost to that country's Irma Balijagic-Adler for the WIBA featherweight title a week ago and to South Korea's Ji-Hye Woo for the IFBA junior lightweight title last summer.

Hollie Dunaway is set to fight in Korean this coming March and a few others are preparing for fights in the more lucrative European market.

When fighting overseas it's always best to wield a knockout punch. But few female prizefighters carry that kind of firepower.

With 11 knockouts in 19 pro fights, Cooper remains her own judge, jury and executioner and displayed that against France's Daniela David, who was forced to quit in the first round in 2007. The bashful Cooper intends to win world titles in several weight classes.

But she really wants those green belts.

"I want to win the WBC belts, that's why I got into boxing," says Cooper, who is a former flyweight titleholder. "I've always wanted one of those green belts. But I'll take any world title belt if the opportunity comes."

Opportunities are what the female boxers are hoping to find in 2009.

"Women fights usually steal the show when they happen," said Jackie Kallen, who manages several boxers including Garside. "They just don't get enough exposure."