

What Is The Past History And Future of Women's Boxing?

Written by Michael Woods
Monday, 14 July 2014 10:13



I recently caught wind of a new push to propel women's back into the limelight where it..how to put this delicately...it hasn't been for a bunch of years.

Me, I'm not one of those guys who applauds that. I say to each his own, if your eyes are wide open, be it man or woman, you should feel free to enter that ring and test yourself. I know that warrior hearts, unlike my own "regular" one, are placed into the bodies of people of both genders...

I thought this time frame before the renewed push to make the female pugilists a more marketable group would be a good time to check in with author **Malissa Smith**. She just released a book called "

A History of Women's Boxing

," and I wanted to pick her brain about the past, present and future for the females who dare to enter this male dominated realm.

Q) You just did an event for the book at the famed Gleason's Gym, in Brooklyn. Can you tell me how it went at Gleasons?

It was a wonderful event. It lasted for approximately two hours and included an exhibition of women's boxing and a reading from A HISTORY OF WOMEN'S BOXING.

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Q) How was the turnout? What were the highlights?

A) Forty to fifty people attended in all including the WBC's Jill Diamond, Harold Lederman and his wife Eileen, and Julie Lederman. I was truly honored that they came to show their support for women's boxing. The biggest highlights for me was having two champions, Alicia "Slick" Ashley and Keisher "Fire" McLeod-Wells give a two-round exhibition. They wowed the audience, many of whom had never actually seen a female bout. Boxer Sonya "The Scholar" Lamonakis acted as MC and gave the audience background on the sport -- and of course having the opportunity to address the crowd of assembled guests was an amazing feeling for me. I not only read a passage, but talked about the pride women boxers should take in knowing that women have been boxing for hundreds of years.

Q) Can you tell me how you started liking boxing, and a bit more about you...where did you grow up?

A) I grew up in Manhattan on the Lower East Side -- East 12th Street to be exact -- in the early 1960s. I was first exposed to boxing there and I grew to love the sport watching Muhammad Ali fights. Another of my favorites was Ken Norton, who had that devastating overhand right. When I was 12 my uncle taught my brother and I the old "one-two" and I was hooked, though it never occurred to me that I could actually box myself until the late 1980s/early 1990s when I began to hear that women were boxing. I finally "crossed the divide" myself into Gleason's Gym in late 1996 and have been training there off and on ever since.

Q) What were your top takeaways from researching for the book?

A) The main one was to learn how entrenched in the culture female participation in the sport truly was whether as fighters, practitioners for exercise, spectators, or behind the scene as managers, refs and even trainers. When I started the project I really didn't know what I would find, just that I'd read that women had boxed in the early 1720's alongside James Figg, who was a big proponent of female prize fighters, and the story about the female bout for a silver butter dish at Henry Hill's in 1876. What I discovered was a rich, well-documented story of women of the ring pieced together through press clippings from the eras I researched. The other thing was understanding how entrenched female boxing was in popular culture -- whether negative or positive, and even to the point of having a female boxer named Hattie Stewart (The Female John L. Sullivan) on a playing card in the mid-1880s as one of the best athletes in the world. I was able to come to the conclusion based on the amount of ink on the subject in the press, and not only the big city dailies, but reprinted from the wire sources in newspapers across the world. It was truly startling revelation.

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Q) Is the public ready for the females in boxing to once again step to the fore? We had Christy Martin, and Laila Ali...but there has been a lack of coverage and interest for a spell.

A) Certainly if one attends fight cards with female bouts, the crowds are wildly enthusiastic about the fighters -- however, it is hard to know the interest level when fights are broadcast--as there have been so, very, very few over the last few years. From the perspective of media promotion--we LOVE a heroine of the stature of Christy Martin, Lucia Rijker or Laila Ali, and right now there are MANY talented female fighters, frankly with greater skills, or certainly the equivalent of Lucia Rijker, who from a pure skill-level was the best of her generation. The problem is, since there is no TV coverage, they are only known by the fans who follow them and the select few boxing writers who report on the sport. Two factors which may help propel the sport into the limelight again are: 1) the rise of female MMA bouts which have wowed audiences with their remarkable skill levels and athleticism and 2) the fact that the sport is now contested at the Olympics. I'll tell you, Michael, I've just been at the Women's National Golden Gloves and was blown away not only by the skills of current USA Boxing members such as Christina Cruz, Virginia Fuchs and Marlen Esparza (incidentally a bronze medal winner in 2012), but the young girls who boxed, some as young as eight, were truly gifted boxers. What we all saw there were the future of the sport: those who will contest and win medals in 2016 and 2020, and those who will make the transition to professional boxing every bit as skilled as true boxer's boxers as their male counterparts.

Q) Has there been a correlation between the women's rights movements, and how females are treated as a whole in the US, and how popular and accepted female boxing is?

A) That is a particularly perceptive question and very apt when it comes to the acceptance of women in the sport. If one looks at the long arc of participation, say going back to the 1880s on through contemporary boxing, women who box and frankly who participate in any way in the sport, including as spectators, skirt the edges of presumed female interests and behavior. Boxing has, after all, been associated with a kind of hyper-masculinity all the way back to Greco-Roman times--and it is, I believe, hard to break through the association of boxing and maleness for many people. And, even though we talk about acceptance of strong women, there is a reluctance to do so. There are two periods where the women's movement had its greatest effect: with the rise of the suffragist (EDITOR NOTE: A suffragist is one who works to get voting rights for people who don't have them.) movement, which paralleled the concept of the "New Woman" roughly from the period of the 1880s - World War I, and the late 1960s-early 70s, when women's militancy led them to take to the courts to garner equal rights, including the right to

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box. Interestingly, and counter-intuitively, women of the ring are *very* accepted in places we would think of as having particularly "macho" cultures -- such as Mexico and Argentina. I truly have not been successful in really accounting for why Americans are uncomfortable with seeing women in the ring boxing, but have no issue with MMA, judo, and other martial sports. What I fall keep falling back on is the deep-seated association of boxing with manliness, something, quite frankly, women never really consider, but still seems to be a pervasive meme in popular culture. Where that goes from here is anyone's guess.

Q) What do you want the average reader to take away from the book?

A) My hope is that readers not only gain an appreciation for the history of the women in the ring, but also for the place of women in general in the eras I researched. We do not often gain insights into the work-a-day world of women from earlier eras, and it is my hope that readers will be wowed by all that women were able to accomplish.

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The Commish says:

This is another of the great boxing books which have recently been released. I have no problem whatsoever with women tossing leather at one another (especially in gloved fists!).

Right now, a Heather Hardy v Shelly Vincent match would be a huge attraction underneath a main event in a place like the Barclay's Center or the Foxwoods Casino. It's got TV written all over it.

Great job on the book by Malissa Smith.

Does anyone old enough remember Jackie Tonawanda from the mid to late 70's? She called herself "The Female Ali."

-Randy G.

Grimm says:

As the general level of skill among female boxers increase, so will the general interest -

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although it will take time, long time.

In my opinion, young girls are often tougher than boys these days - the latter are born and bred on computer games and have a physical status that's a disaster already at a young age. They wanna be somebody, and at 15 or 16 or 17 or whatever they take the walk to a gym - but can't handle reality once they enter it. The girls who walk thru that door have to overcome a special mental obstacle - the common opinion that she has nothing to do there. And thus, they are often of a different breed.

And of course girls are more technically gifted than boys. That's nothing new. Talking technically complex maneuvers during the tween- and teen years, we're talking girls. They simply kick the s--t out of most guys in karate, and initially often in boxing too.

Go, girls, go!

Radam G says:

[QUOTE=The Commish;58097]This is another of the great boxing books which have recently been released. I have no problem whatsoever with women tossing leather at one another (especially in gloved fists!).

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Does anyone old enough remember Jackie Tonawanda from the mid to late 70's? She called herself "The Female Ali."

-Randy G.[/QUOTE]

Bless her soul. She died a few years ago. I don't recall her boxing. But I barely recall baby Radam -- me -- sitting on her lap in 1979. Was she really GOAT Ali-ish? Could she "Float like a butterfly, and sting like a bee?" Did she talk smack? Did she call herself "pretty?"

Help us out, Commish! You got us curious now. And they say that "Curiosity kills the cat." But that is some "they" crap. I have yet to see a curious cat flatlined. Hehe! Holla!

Bernie Campbell says:

Who would by a book about this kind of trash!

Women should be barefoot in the kitchen and subdued! What kind of wolf tickets are you knuckleheads trying to sell here!

amayseng says:

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Unbelievable!! a Bernie Campbell sighting!!!

I dont care what he says I cant get enough

Radam G says:

The future of women boksing will be "floating like a butterfly and stinging like a bee." Expect another Ali: [url]http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QWoaqtazS7I. Holla!

The Commish says:

Every once in a while, Radam, Bernie escapes from the asylum & appears here, on our Facebook pages & even on my show. Then, he gets apprehended & taken away again. Hopefully, the authorities zero in on the IP address & can apprehend him again.

-Randy G.

the Roast says:

We've been talking about women's boxing here for as long as I can remember. It just never goes anywhere. That breakout fight between Christy Martin and Dedra Gogarty was almost 20 years ago. Nothing much since. I'm no insider but I just don't think there's any money to be made. Not a good sign when somewhat popular ladies Champ Holly Holm quits boxing and starts up with MMA. Holm is looking to get paid by joining the UFC and taking on Ronda Rousey. I don't think Dana White pays those fighters very much but its got to be better than fighting in the obscurity of women's boxing.

the Roast says:

Oh yeah, welcome back Bernie.

The Shadow says:

[QUOTE=amayseng;58130]Unbelievable!! a Bernie Campbell sighting!!!

I dont care what he says I cant get enough[/QUOTE]

Co-sign! CO-SIGN! CO-SIGN!!

Skibbz says:

There aren't too many female boxers I follow, there are the Team England fighters, the Olympic fighters and a few British pro's. The only foreign female fighter I really keep a track of is Cecilia Comunales, only because la reina models beside her boxing.

brownsugar says:

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I like watching badass women in action movies and animation. Remember "Sheena the She Warrior"? One of my favorite TV shows.

And I don't begrudge female boxers from making a living. And I respect their level of skill and dedication but for me its a different sport due to the anatomical differences. Which even includes a slightly different set of rules because of the differences in the female gender.

Unlike our friend Bernie this is not a sexist statement.(welcome back sir).

Like Grimm mentioned earlier... Some of our female counterparts can trounce a male competitor in a heartbeat.

When I was in the eleventh grade my girlfriend at the time was a senior and the Homecoming Queen that year... She was a looker but she could box and play basketball better than most of the guys in my neighborhood.

She could block, parry, feint, use lateral movement and set up a lead right hand like Tommy Hearns.

She out boxed me into submission many times in my basement while my mom was at work. He middle name was Jo.... But I spelled it Joe...lol

And she was real good about not leaving any bruises on my face. But I was on the wrestling team so I could take it.

She was even more dominant on the basketball court.... She played sports like she had been coached for several years on a competitive team....I eventually found out many years later that her dad had taught her how to play all the sports when she was just a child.

So as you can see, i truly respect female boxers from a personal perspective...But there hasn't been a single time in my life when I would have been willing to plunk down \$70 bucks to watch women fight on a PPV Show.

I don't know if there ever has been a Women's PPV bout... But if I ever buy the event....that's when you'll know they've truly arrived.

As for the book... I'd have no problems buying it. It sounds like a vividly unique perspective about a side of boxing I rarely get to see.

The Shadow says:

[QUOTE=The Commish;58159]Every once in a while, Radam, Bernie escapes from the asylum & appears here, on our Facebook pages & even on my show. Then, he gets apprehended & taken away again. Hopefully, the authorities zero in on the IP address & can apprehend him again.

-Randy G.[/QUOTE]

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Hahaha I say forgo the apprehension and let the man run amuck! Don't take him away!

The Shadow says:

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You're right, I don't think there's any interest whatsoever in seeing women on PPV unless there's an extreme novelty involved....

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Like the one time it did go on PPV for "Ali-Frazier IV." Here, the selling point wasn't the fight, the selling point was novelty and nostalgia.

The nature of the sport simply doesn't allow for it to capture wide imagination because of the nature of the sport.

UNLESS you're a promotional genius like Dana White.

It's uncomfortable seeing a woman get punched in the face and knocked out. And even in the case of the UFC, Ronda Rousey doesn't knock people out, she judo slams them down and puts them in arm bars.

It's a satisfying and decisive climax but it doesn't make you cringe and turn away like the Ann Wolfe knockout of that basketball chick.

Radam G says:

Dang! OMG! Ann "The Mermaid" Wolfe is the only fighter to ever scare me from sparring with her/him and out of the gym. I'm still cringing just thinking of that crazy dame. Before fighting that basketball damsel, she was aiming to knock me TFO in a sparring session and then do the nasty to me while I was "*uckin' sleepin' beauty KTFO," she said.

Wow! I knew what time it was. And got outta Dodge by jumping out the restroom window and running like a scary BYTTTTCH for my life. I even left my car in parking lot and sent a cousin who is a cop to get it the next morning. I ain't crazy.

The Mermaid knocked the basketballette [sic] da double fudge OUT a week-in-a-half later.

[url]<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1h-hmcnlmrQ>. Holla!

ArneK. says:

Like the Commish and brownsugar, I'm OK with female boxing, but that doesn't mean that I have to like it.

There have been many milestones in female boxing such as the cover story on Christy Martin in Sports Illustrated. However, I agree with brownsugar that a better milestone would be a successful PPV promotion and I don't foresee that happening anytime soon. In fact, I'll bet that if Rhonda Rousey was featured on an all-female PPV card that the PPV numbers would be lousy.

Bob Arum attempted to capitalize on all the positive press that graced the Academy Award winning movie "Million Dollar Baby" by staging a fight between Lucia Rijker and Christy Martin, supposedly guaranteeing \$1 million to the winner. The bout fell out when Rijker suffered a torn Achilles tendon and boy was Arum relieved, although he would never admit it. Based on advance sales, he was going to take a big bath. Casual fans could care less and knowledgeable fans knew it would have been a mismatch -- Ms. Rijker was in a league of her own.

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Had the bout come off, I could have seen it live for free. I probably would have just to hobnob with friends, but I doubt that I would have found the fight entertaining and would have probably slinked off before it was over.

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That was an interesting slice of history Arnek Don't be so economical in the future with your knowledge of boxing history.