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## Recommended Citation

Monica L. Lowe, *"Momma Said Knock You Out": Women in Boxing*, 1 DePaul J. Sports L. & Contemp. Probs. 48 (2003)  
Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/jslcp/vol1/iss1/6>

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## “MOMMA SAID KNOCK YOU OUT!”: WOMEN IN BOXING

*Monica L. Lowe*

Boxing is the “art of attack and defense with the fists practiced as a sport.” [EN 1] Boxing is a male dominated sport that is brutal, violent and punishing. In the boxing ring are two skilled fighters, swinging and landing punches to the head and upper body trying to reach the ultimate goal of this barbaric sport – a knockout.

Although boxing is exciting, dramatic, suspenseful and mysteriously glorious, it has a dark side as one of the fiercest contact sports ever. Some argue that beating an opponent beyond recognition and into a state of oblivion is not a sport at all. [EN 2] Boxers step into the ring accepting the risks of temporary injuries, permanent injuries and even death. Some of the injuries boxers subject themselves to are: concussions (a brief loss of brain function), brain hemorrhage, broken nose, eye problems, broken cheekbone, broken jaw, broken teeth, cuts and bruises, punctured eardrum, bitten ears, [EN 3] shoulder injuries, broken ribs, ruptured spleen, damaged liver, damaged abdominal organs, wrist injuries, blood loss, internal bleeding, “punch drunk” syndrome (pugilistic dementia), [EN 4] Parkinson’s disease, Alzheimer’s disease, paralysis and/or death. [EN 5]

At the advent of boxing, only men were allowed to participate. Thus, men have set the athletic standard in boxing. The only female allowed in the ring was the half naked, yet sexually exploited “round card girl”. Within the recent decades, women have infiltrated the sport of boxing, not as round card girls, but as fighters. The acceptance of women in boxing has been a struggle. The struggle entails overcoming a male dominated sports industry that has a hard time accepting the fact that a woman can pack a punch, endure punishment to her feminine body, get bloody and bruised and not cry about it.

The boxing entertainment industry and even society has a hard time coming to grips with a woman who is strong mentally and physically and a true “fighter” in her own right. Today, women have made notable strides not only in sports, but also in government, education, and their careers rebutting the societal gender role notion that “women are inferior” to men. A woman’s right to be confident, strong and dominant are finally tolerated in our society. But, it seems that the tolerance of “girl power” is not universal to all opportunities where women would obviously excel. Especially in male dominated sports, like boxing.

As in the past, which is still true today, society establishes our gender roles. For example, studies show that men are encouraged to be athletic, tough, self-sufficient, powerful, dominant, aggressive and most importantly, different from women. [EN 6] In contrast, society encourages women “to sacrifice their ambitions and personal needs in order to please and care for others.” [EN 7] Women are “expected by our culture to be giving, emotional, unstable, weak, and talkative about their problems; they are valued for their looks or charm or smallness but not their strength or brains; they are considered unfeminine (“bad”) if they are ambitious, demanding and tough or rough...” [EN 8]

One should ask why *capable* women are limited in their aspirations and goals to do and achieve certain things athletically for the sake of conformity to gender roles. The answer for this absurd limitation: gender is “the most relevant characteristic determining opportunity for athletes in contact sports.” [EN 9] Conformity to gender roles subtly equates to gender discrimination. Thus, gender discrimination limits a woman’s opportunities to excel in traditionally male dominated sports, like boxing. Even though gender discrimination enrages many women, the

experience always fuels them to prove the culture wrong about their motivation, determination, physical strength and mental strength and literally speaking, women always FIGHT BACK!

Women are overtly discriminated against in boxing. For example, women do not enjoy the same lucrative purse winnings compared to their male counterparts. [EN 10] In 1999, Mike Tyson won a match after he beat Orlin Norris to a pulp. Tyson's winnings: \$8.7 million. In 2000, Evander Holyfield defeated John Ruiz. Holyfield's winnings: \$5 million. In 2001, Laila Ali and Jacqui Frazier-Lyde fought. Ali won the bout and both women received a six-figure purse. [EN 11] "The sports community justifies this overt discrimination by citing differences in male and female athletic ability and explaining the need to yield to consumer demand". [EN 12] Ability and gender should not be confused. However, studies show that from infancy, ability and gender are mistakenly synonymous. [EN 13] To prove this point, the following statements have rolled out of the mouths of male fighters, male boxing officials and non-supporters within the last decade on women in boxing:

"...worried that such a bruising sport could damage their marriage prospects." [EN 14]

"...women cannot box because periods, premenstrual tension and the pill makes them too unstable.." [EN 15]

"...the idea of women with bloody noses, thrashing it out in the ring is plain barbaric." [EN 16]

"Women are too frail to box because they bruise easily and become unstable when suffering from pre-menstrual tension." [EN 17]

"Women's boxing is disgraceful." [EN 18]

"A woman is a petite person, not to be knocked around." [EN 19]

"...boxing contains health risks for women, the sport might be sued by female participants.." [EN 20]

"They have no idea what they're doing and they're not mentally or physically mature to handle it." [EN 21]

"It's totally wrong, totally out of order and it degrades the sport." [EN 22]

The above listed statements are troubling for two reasons. Firstly, they patronize male chauvinism and antiquated gender roles. Secondly, they are totally ignorant, untrue and unfounded when history shows that the women in boxing are absolutely phenomenal.

Since the 1720's women have been making their mark in boxing. [EN 23] The sport of boxing was introduced at the 1904 Olympic Games in St. Louis. [EN 24] Women's boxing was a displayed event at the third Olympic games. [EN 25] In 1954, Barbara Buttrick, undefeated women's World Fly and Bantamweight boxing champion (1950-1960), was one of the most famous women boxers of all time and became the first female boxer to have her fight broadcast on national television. [EN 26] In 1975, Eva Shain was the first female judge to work a world heavyweight title bout with Muhammad Ali vs. Earnie Shavers. [EN 27] In 1993, USA boxing began recognizing female boxers as members and promulgated rules and regulations implementing women's amateur boxing into its amateur boxing program. [EN 28] Women's boxing received a boost in March 1996 when Christy Martin and Dierdre Gogarty were paired on the undercard of the Mike Tyson/Frank Bruno fight. [EN 29] In 1996, amateur women boxers in England enjoyed a lift of a 116-year ban against women boxing. [EN 30] In 1997, USA Boxing held for the first time a Women's National Championship fight. Laila Ali, a twenty-three year

old super middle weight, in her twenty month career holds a record of 10-0 (eight knockouts). Heavyweight, Jacquelyn Frazier-Lyde, a thirty-nine year old attorney and mother of three, holds a career record of 7-1 (seven knockouts). Christy Martin, thirty-two year old jr. welterweight, holds a career record of 43-2 (thirty-one knockouts). All three women have been praised for their aggression and athletic prowess in the ring.

In support of the growth of women's boxing, associations have formed to support and promote female boxers around the world. In April of 1997, the International Female Boxer's Association (IFBA) was formed to promote and develop female boxing into a sport which will "persuade Olympic Committees that women's boxing is worthy of being included in future world games as well as garnering support for the future induction of women in the Boxing Hall of Fame". [EN 31] The IFBA has established eighteen weight divisions ranging from jr. strawweight to heavyweight.

Women's International Boxing Federation (WIBF) was created by Barbara Buttrick. [EN 32] This federation was formed to track results of all women's bouts and rank and highlight the best women boxers worldwide from all 18 weight divisions. [EN 33]

The International Boxing Association (IBA) was initially created for male boxers to "advance the sport of professional boxing" across the world. [EN 34] The IBA also features female boxing champions, rankings and upcoming events. [EN 35] The IBA also has promulgated guidelines for male and female boxing matches. [EN 36]

There is an obvious misunderstanding between the sexes and society about ability and gender, which in turn creates hype. Society and the media feed off this hype of whether or not a woman is good enough to hold her ground in a man's sport. On October 9, 1999 in Seattle, Washington, Margaret McGregor, professional female boxer, fed into the gender line hype when she participated in the very first professional boxing match against a man, Loi Chow. [EN 37] Although the match was controversial and labeled an exhibition, McGregor aggressively and skillfully pounced her male opponent and took the victory. McGregor's victory in this fight showed that despite real differences in men and women, the sexes are equal and that with confidence, preparation, training, and skill, a woman can be successful at anything.

In the boxing business, hurt happens. Thus, safety is an important aspect of boxing for both the male and female fighter. For both sexes, routine safety measures are taken before, during and after a boxing match like: hepatitis B, hepatitis C and HIV testing, pre and post fight medical examinations and mandatory rest periods if a boxer is injured or concussed. [EN 38] Due to real differences between the male and female anatomy, additional safeguards are put in place to especially protect the female body. Prior to fight time, a female boxer must put on a "tailor fitted breast protector" and submit to a pregnancy test that must show negative results at weigh in time. [En 39] These safety measures are substantiated for the protection of the female accessory organ (breasts) and reproductive health.

Certain alleged "safety measures" that are not substantiated in women's boxing when compared to men's boxing are the differences in rules regarding number of rounds and round times. For example, the IBA rules show round times for women are shorter than round times for men. [EN 40] Women also have less total rounds than men. [EN 41] Specifically, women's bouts can go no more than ten rounds with each round lasting two minutes with a one-minute rest between rounds. [EN 42] In contrast, male bouts are twelve rounds of a three-minute duration, and one-minute rest period. [EN 43] The shorter time in the ring can be seen as nothing other than a disguised discriminatory safety measure to protect the female boxer. But why? Answer: women need to be protected from sustained beating to the body. In the sport of

boxing there is no protection from bodily harm or pain. A trained and prepared woman enters the ring enters voluntarily, thus accepting all risks involved including the concussions, the knock out, the broken nose, the blood and maybe loss of life. The boxing industry and society should “not get extra upset just because [the boxer happens to be] a woman...If she is willing to take the risk, train her out of bad habits that make the injury more likely, prepare her well for competition, supervise the action properly, then let her go for it!” [EN 44]

Despite the hurt and the safety concerns surrounding boxing, women’s boxing is becoming a growing interest among females of all ages because boxing is something more than a sport. Time, preparation and training creates a skilled boxer of any gender. Running, weight training, punching bags, mock fights (train to take and endure the pain), coordination, balance, defense strategy, and sweat appears to aid the boxer in all aspects of his/her life. Boxing has a social benefit. “Female participation in athletics like [boxing] correlates to greater educational attainment, lower teen pregnancy rates, lower substance abuse rates, greater self-esteem, more positive body image, and a host of other indicators of [positive] physical and psychological health.” [EN 45] Like martial arts, boxing is empowering and it gives women the self-defense skills to make them less vulnerable to violence. “In a society in which men hit women, and women rarely defend themselves or hit back effectively...”, self-defense matters. From verbal abuse to degrading and antagonistic comments, boxing makes a woman mentally tough and helps her fight back in more ways than her fists. [EN 46]

Women across the world enter the sport of boxing for many reasons. Some Indian women in New Delhi are entering the ring to help them gain self-confidence “in hopes that they will go on to find jobs with the police and paramilitary”. [En 47] Laila Ali, Jacqui Frazier-Lyde and Freda Foreman are the daughters of boxing’s greatest male fighters, Muhammad Ali, Joe Frazier and George Foreman. [EN 48] These fathers served as role models to their daughters. Laila, Jacqui and Freda have emulated the athletic talents of their fathers. They have proven that there is nothing wrong with following in your daddy’s footsteps, even though he is a boxer.

Other female boxer’s reportedly “enter the ring” because boxing relieves stress, helps tone the muscles of the body, helps develop and strengthen mental discipline and allows a female fighter to be a role model for girls and young women. Mischa Merz, an international fighter, began to box because she “enjoyed exhibiting her aggression in a public arena, gathering knowledge about her strengths and to test her ability to hurt and withstand hurt”. [EN 49]

Whether or not women’s boxing is appealing to our culture, it is here to stay. As women’s boxing gains more sponsorship, television coverage, and fan camaraderie, it is sure to receive all of the respect it deserves. Boxing is opening a world of opportunities to young women and girls. Any able bodied person has a right to explore any opportunity, including a woman who wants to box.

[EN 1] Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary 173 (9th ed. 1987).

[EN 2] BBC News, *Health: Latest News - How to make boxing illegal* (June 12, 1998), available at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/latest\\_news/111438.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/latest_news/111438.stm) (last visited April 12, 2003).

[EN 3] On June 29, 1997, Mike Tyson was disqualified after the 3<sup>rd</sup> round in his rematch fight for the World Boxing Association (WBA) heavy weight title against Evander Holyfield when Tyson bit off a piece of flesh from the top of Holyfield’s right ear. Plastic surgery was needed to reattach Holyfield’s ear. Associated Press, *Tyson bites off more than he can chew* (June 30, 1997), available at <http://www.indian-express.com/ie/daily/19970630/18150723.html> (last visited April 12, 2003).

[EN 4] An incurable dementia caused by repeated and severe blows to the head. It can be seen as severe brain damage that “afflicts memory [and] judgment [and] causes stupor [and] disintegration of the personality.” The dementia worsens over time and can leave the afflicted helpless. Tim Sullivan, *Pryor pays heavy price with memory* (June 9, 1999), available at [http://enquirer.com/columns/sullivan/1999/06/09/ts\\_pryor\\_pays\\_heavy.html](http://enquirer.com/columns/sullivan/1999/06/09/ts_pryor_pays_heavy.html) (last visited April 12, 2003).

[EN 5] Dr. James Bennett Bragman, F.A.C.P., *Chapter 19: Boxing and Martial Arts* (October 12, 2001), available at <http://www.bragmanhealth.com/books/sports/ch19.html> (last visited April 12, 2003).

[EN 6] Dr. Clayton E. Tucker-Ladd, *Competition and Feeling Superior to Others – Society establishes gender roles for us* (1996 – 2000), available at <http://mentalhelp.net/psychhelp/chap9/chap9p.htm> (last visited April 12, 2003).

[EN 7] *Id.*

[EN 8] *Id.*

[EN 9] Suzanne Sangree, *Title IX and the Contact Sports Exemption: Gender Stereotypes in a Civil Rights Statute*, 32 Conn. L. Rev. 381 (2000).

[EN 10] Syda Kosofsky, *Toward Gender Equality in Professional Sports*, 4 Hastings Women’s L.J. 209, 213 (1993).

[EN 11] Luis Escobar, *Ali Scores Majority Decision Over Frazier*, *The Boxing Times* (November 12, 2001), at [http://www.boxingtimes.com/analyses/2001/010608ali\\_frazier\\_lyde.html](http://www.boxingtimes.com/analyses/2001/010608ali_frazier_lyde.html) (last visited May 5, 2003).

[EN 12] *See* Kosofsky, *supra* note 10.

[EN 13] Dr. Clayton E. Tucker-Ladd, *Competition and Feeling Superior to Others – Society establishes gender roles for us* (1996 – 2000), at <http://mentalhelp.net/psychhelp/chap9/chap9p.htm>.

[EN 14] Reuters, *Indian Women Ready to Pack a Punch*, *The Financial Gazette* (February 8, 2001), at <http://www.fingaz.co.zw/fingaz/2001/February/February8/603.shtml> (last visited May 5, 2003).

[EN 15] BBC News, *Talking Point: Should Women be Allowed to Box?* (August 14, 1998), at <http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/tp-archive/150914.stm> (last visited May 5, 2003).

[EN 16] *Id.*

[EN 17] BBC News Online, *Sport – Boxing ‘Fears Death of Woman Fighter’* (February 13, 1998), at [http://news1.thdo.bbc.co.uk/low/english/sport/newsid\\_56000/56481.stm](http://news1.thdo.bbc.co.uk/low/english/sport/newsid_56000/56481.stm) (last visited May 5, 2003).

[EN 18] Sydney Tribe, *Women’s Boxing* (July 2000), at <http://www.mattcleary.com/womensboxing.htm> (last visited May 5, 2003).

[EN 19] *Id.*

[EN 20] *Id.*

[EN 21] Nando Media and Reuters, *WBF heavyweight condemns women’s boxing* (November 18, 1998), available at <http://archive.sportserver.com/newsroom/sports/oth/1998/oth/box/feat/archive/111898/box59327.html> (last visited May 5, 2003).

[EN 22] *Id.*

[EN 23] Women Boxing Archive Network, *History of Women’s Boxing*, at <http://www.womenboxing.com/historic.htm> (last visited May 5, 2003).

[EN 24] *Id.*

[EN 25] *Id.*

[EN 26] *Id.*

[EN 27] *Id.*

[EN 28] *Id.*

[EN 29] *Id.*

[EN 30] *Id.*

[EN 31] International Female Boxer's Association, *About the International Female Boxers Association* (1998), at <http://www.ifba.com/about.htm> (last visited April 12, 2003).

[EN 32] See *supra* note 23 and accompanying text.

[EN 33] Women's International Boxing Federation, see <http://www.wibf.org/index.html> (last visited May 5, 2003).

[EN 34] International Boxing Association, see <http://www.ibamensboxing.com> (last visited May 5, 2003).

[EN 35] See <http://www.womenboxing.com>.

[EN 36] See *infra* note 40.

[EN 37] Women's Boxing Archive Network, *Margaret McGregor One of the Most Controversial Boxers of the '90s* (October 8, 1999), at <http://www.wban.net/margaret.htm> (last visited May 5, 2003).

[EN 38] Dr. Lou Lewis, *Safety Aspects of Women in Boxing 1997* (1997), at <http://www.clinipath.com.au/~loulewis/reply9.html> (last visited May 5, 2003).

[EN 39] *Id.*

[EN 40] International Boxing Association, *Highlights of the I.B.A. Rules-Uniformed Championship Rules*, available at <http://www.womensboxing.com> (last visited April 12, 2003).

[EN 41] *Id.*

[EN 42] *Id.*

[EN 43] *Id.*

[EN 44] Julie Morgan, *Attitudes to Women's Boxing: The Good, the Bad, and the (Really) Ugly*, available at <http://fscclub.com/contra/injuries.shtml> (last visited May 5, 2003).

[EN 45] See Sangree, *supra* note 9.

[EN 46] Mariah Burton Nelson, *Why We Should Pay Attention to Female Boxers* (2000), at <http://www.mariahburtonnelson.com/Articles/boxers.htm> (last visited May 5, 2003).

[EN 47] See *supra* note 14.

[EN 48] See Burton Nelson, *supra* note 46.

[EN 49] Mary Rose Liverani, *Bruising: A journey through gender* by Mischa Merz (Dec. 2000), available at <http://www.lawsociety.com.au/page.asp?partid.=66> (last visited April 12, 2003).