

Magazine | ESSAY

# Women Have Been Boxing in the Shadows for Too Long

By JAIME LOWE AUG. 15, 2016

There's a scene in "T-Rex" — a documentary that follows the middleweight phenom Claressa Shields from her hometown of Flint, Mich., to the 2012 Olympic Games in London and back again — that perfectly illustrates the biggest problem faced by women's boxing. Shields is sitting with two Team U.S.A. representatives and her coach, Jason Crutchfield, in a nondescript lobby after glory and fanfare have receded into a post-Olympic haze. She has returned home after four decisive victories, having won the first American gold medal in women's boxing. She's 17. The reps from Team U.S.A. are discussing her sponsorship opportunities. Names like Ryan Lochte and Gabby Douglas are tossed out as the sort of Olympians to whom sponsors flock. Team U.S.A.'s public-relations consultant, a woman named Julie Goldsticker, goes into an incomprehensible description of why sponsors are attracted to certain people. Then she looks at Shields and says: "I would love for you to stop saying that you like beating people up and making them cry."

Shields's brow creases. She looks completely befuddled. "I box," she says.

The paradox is clear: Shields cannot visibly enjoy fighting to succeed financially as a boxer. It's a violent sport. If she were a man, that bloodlust, that taste for combat, would be courted. It would be used as a selling point to hype fights, as it always has. But for a woman to admit that she likes aggression, relishes controlled rage, thrives on ferocity and enjoys the feeling of gut-punches, well, that is unfathomable, or it seemed so to the Team U.S.A. reps. They had no idea how to sell her, even after she was featured in a multimedia photo essay in The New York Times,

profiled by *The New Yorker*, heard on NPR or highlighted in any number of other media appearances. They could not figure out how to sell her in spite of her ready-made biopic childhood — a narrative riddled with disadvantage, abuse and sexual violence that ends in winning Olympic gold. Just before Shields left for Rio, where she will compete again as a middleweight boxer, she told me: “People say the way I talk about boxing is too mean and too tough, but I do enjoy hitting people, or I wouldn’t be a boxer. I’m not gonna pretend that isn’t part of it or part of me.”

Shields went on to talk about something a lot of professional female boxers have mentioned before: that there isn’t support for women’s boxing on a professional level. Boxing’s biggest broadcasters — HBO and Showtime — have been reluctant to feature women’s fight cards. Showtime hasn’t had a women’s boxing match since 2001; HBO and P.B.C. have never shown a women’s bout. “It feels like they’re being sexist in the professional game,” Shields says. It is sexism. And it goes all the way through women’s boxing, at every level. In 2010, the International Boxing Association introduced skirts — yes, skirts — to help “distinguish” the female fighters from the men, as if the audience couldn’t tell the difference otherwise. The Polish national boxing coach went so far as to tell BBC Sport that he’d made the skirts mandatory, saying: “By wearing skirts, in my opinion, it gives a good impression, a womanly impression. Wearing shorts is not a good way for women boxers to dress.” In 2012, at the London Games (where skirts were optional), all the women’s bouts, including the gold-medal finals, were fought in the afternoon while men fought in prime time; the women fought on consecutive days with only one rest day, while the men fought every other day to include rest.

Women’s boxing has never been an easy sell. The first female boxer dates back to 1722, when Elizabeth Wilkinson challenged Hannah Hyfield to a bout through an ad she placed in the *London Journal*: “I, Elizabeth Wilkinson, of Clerkenwell, having had some words with Hannah Hyfield, and requiring Satisfaction, do invite her to meet me on the Stage and Box me.” It was around the same time that men’s boxing was being promoted as a barroom spectacle. For six years, Hyfield fought both men and women professionally, wearing “close jackets, short petticoats, coming just below the knee, Holland drawers, white stockings and pumps,” according to the same newspaper advertisements. In the late 1800s, Nell Saunders and Rose Harland fought the first women’s boxing match in the United States; the prize was a silver

9

ARTICLES REMAINING

butter dish. Twenty-five years later, in 1904, boxing made its debut as an Olympic sport in St. Louis — men's boxing was admitted as a competitive sport, but women's boxing was limited to exhibition bouts. By the late 1970s and into the early '80s, women's boxing was resurrected. Some of the first women to be licensed for boxing in the United States were Marian Trimiar, known as Lady Tyger, and Jackie Tonawanda; Cathy Davis, known as Cat, appeared as the first female boxer on the cover of *The Ring* magazine in 1978. Their efforts were overshadowed by rumors of match-fixing that pretty much shut down any serious competition. Davis once told me in an interview that the bouts may have been fixed, but it didn't mean they weren't working hard athletically or even real boxers. But their reputations as athletes were tarnished in the public eye. It took a few more decades for another push into women's professional boxing: In the early aughts, Christy Martin, Laila Ali and Ann Wolfe briefly captured mainstream attention. That petered out in 2001 after the first pay-per-view fight with female headliners — it seemed like the whole enterprise rested on famous last names.

Boxing, if it was smart and forward-thinking, would recognize that it needs women (especially the Claressa Shieldses of the world) in order to compete with other combat sports that are dominating the market. It may be no accident that after a 1-minute-and-41-second technical knockout at the Barclays Center last month, the main line of questioning for the victor, the featherweight Amanda Serrano, was: "Are you training in M.M.A.?" There is money to be made for female fighters in M.M.A., in part because the U.F.C.'s president, Dana White, decided to reverse a 2011 decision barring women. "This whole women's-power movement that's going on right now is crazy," he said during a 2015 news conference. "Ronda [Rousey] has been the whole thing. Ronda is the one that launched this whole thing. I wouldn't have done it if it wasn't for Ronda. She's the one that convinced me to do it." When Ronda Rousey fought Holly Holms (previously a professional boxer), U.F.C. made more than \$50 million in pay-per-view buys. White now calls the decision to open up a women's division one of the smartest and most bankable decisions he's ever made; earlier this year, his company sold for \$4 billion.

So why has M.M.A. succeeded where women's boxing has historically failed? One answer is organization — U.F.C. has one governing body, and women's boxing has four. That means a proliferation of belts, and a lack of central authority to ensure

that fights are well-matched, timely and fair. Women's boxing also suffers from a lack of exposure: Fights need to be televised in order to gauge audience enthusiasm and to build audience in the first place. "Women's boxing just isn't televised," the promoter Lou DiBella told me. "Boxing for generations and centuries has been a man's sport, and when women popped up, it was treated as a novelty." One way to fix it, he suggested, was to advocate for equality: National figures like Ellen DeGeneres and Oprah Winfrey need to champion fighters and to provide a platform for them. The professional featherweight Heather Hardy thinks male fighters should insist on televised female undercards as part of their contracts. "Sneak us on to a broadcast and let the audience decide. But don't put together some all-women's card on Showtime Extreme at 2 a.m. That's a sideshow." Hardy, a single mother with a 12-year-old daughter, works full-time as a personal trainer in addition to training and fighting professionally; she also sells blocks of tickets to finance her fights. "Someone needs to be held accountable, because it's not fair," she says. "After one fight, I walked away with \$30,000 in ticket sales and a \$10,000 purse, and the next guy, also on the undercard and not televised, made \$150,000 for his purse. And I bet he didn't sell any of his own tickets."

Women's boxing also needs a champion like Dana White to push for capitalization on market potential so that this generation of Olympic boxers, like Claressa Shields, has somewhere to go professionally. That person may be Stephen Espinoza, the general manager of Showtime sports, who recently told *The Wall Street Journal* that he could see showing a professional women's bout on a live broadcast within the next six months. Even more promising, P.B.C. will air its first-ever female undercard, between Heather Hardy and Shelly Vincent on Aug. 21 in Coney Island, on NBC Sports — a fight promoted by DiBella.

To publicize the fight between Hardy and Vincent, the fighters and promoters accentuated the very thing Team U.S.A. was trying to suppress. The fighters stood toe-to-toe at a news conference: Vincent sporting aviators, neck tattoos, a tricolor mohawk and a jean vest; Hardy stone-faced, wearing a strapless green dress. Each said she wanted very badly to punch the other fighter in the face. Vincent assured me there was passion behind this, that the women always steal the show with more action, more punching, more to prove. Breaking glass ceilings — or in this case, fists and faces — seems especially significant in a year when Hillary Clinton is poised to

be the next president and when our current president has written a feminist essay for Glamour that includes the sentiment that “this is an extraordinary time to be a woman.” He mentions female athletes in particular and that a lot of work is left to be done; he calls on us to “keep changing the attitude that raises our girls to be demure.” Or as Claressa Shields puts it: “Everybody talks about equal rights, but no one is doing anything about it. Put women on cards. Pay them what you pay the men.”

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