

A History of Women's Boxing

By Malissa Smith

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Records of modern female boxing date back to the early eighteenth century in London, and in the 1904 Olympics an exhibition bout between women was held. Yet it was not until the 2012 Olympics—more than 100 years later—that women's boxing was officially added to the Games. Throughout boxing's history, women have fought in and out of the ring to gain respect in a sport traditionally considered for men alone. The stories of these women are told for the first time in this comprehensive work dedicated to women's boxing.

A History of Women's Boxing traces the sport back to the 1700s, through the 2012 Olympic Games, and up to the present. Inside-the-ring action is brought to life through photographs, newspaper clippings, and anecdotes, as are the stories of the women who played important roles outside the ring, from spectators and judges to managers and trainers. This book includes extensive profiles of the sport's pioneers, including Barbara Buttrick whose plucky carnival shows launched her professional boxing career in the 1950s; sixteen-year-old Dallas Malloy who single-handedly overturned the strictures against female amateur boxing in 1993; the famous "boxing daughters" Laila Ali and Jacqui Frazier-Lyde; and teenager Claressa Shields, the first American woman to win a boxing gold medal at the Olympics.

Rich in detail and exhaustively researched, this book illuminates the struggles, obstacles, and successes of the women who fought—and continue to fight—for respect in their sport. *A History of Women's Boxing* is a must-read for boxing fans, sports historians, and for those interested in the history of women in sports.

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Editorial Review

Review
In her classic meditation *On Boxing*, Joyce Carol Oates wrote, 'Boxing is for men, and it is about men. A celebration of the lost religion of masculinity all the more trenchant for being lost.' Smith (herself an amateur boxer) challenges that idea in this study of the long, sometimes all but invisible, history of women in the ring. As early as 1722, when Elizabeth Wilkinson challenged Hannah Hayfield to meet her 'on the Stage' and battle for three guineas, women have expressed a desire to fight for money, honor, championships, or physical satisfaction. As much as anything, Smith claims, women entered the ring as an expression of their desire and right to shape their identities. Since Wilkinson's challenge, women, for the most part, have been denied full expression of that desire; their participation in boxing has had something of a sideshow quality. But in recent decades, women have won that right and fought with distinction (as the appearance of professional boxer Christy Martin on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* and Claressa Shields's gold medal in the middleweight division in the 2012 Olympics demonstrate). . . .Summing Up: Recommended. All readers. (*CHOICE*)

Blogger (Girlboxing) and amateur boxer Smith traces the sport as far back as early 18th-century England, unearthing sources documenting matches involving women with such intimidating nicknames as 'Bruising Peg.' Serious women boxers have long had to counter the taint of risqueness in their sport; as one might expect, the growth of women's boxing has not been a steady climb but has waxed and waned as public attitudes have changed. A surge in popularity in the 1990s led to the sport's inclusion in the 2012 Summer Olympics. Smith enlivens her scholarly treatment with colorful anecdotes (the death threats once sent to women boxers), strange facts (U.S. jurisdictions forced fighters to wear aluminum bras), and lots of examples of press coverage illuminating societal attitudes toward female fisticuffs. Some 20 well-chosen photographs spotlight the sport's past and present. The thorough bibliography should satisfy the most curious student. VERDICT A comprehensive, entertaining work for readers interested in women's history or sports history. (*Library Journal*)

While today's female boxers benefit from organized training, professional management, media exposure, and societal acceptance, history shows that it has not been an easy climb. Smith meticulously documents the journey of female pugilists from their beginnings in London in the early eighteenth century to their first inclusion in the Olympics in 2012. Casual fans may recognize such contemporaries as Christi Morgan and Laila Ali, but the fighters who really light up this account are such now-forgotten figures as Texas Mamie, Barbara ('The Mighty Atom of the Ring') Buttrick, and Cathy 'Cat' Davis. Smith weaves together excerpts from firsthand accounts of memorable bouts with social history to provide a complete picture of the struggles and sacrifices these women and many others, such as female promoters and managers, faced in order to legitimize the sport they loved. This is a thoughtful and inclusive account of the evolution of women's boxing and will make a strong addition to most sports collections. (*Booklist*)

[W]hen it comes to the Sweeter Science, this 346-page tome is the Bible, one that was sorely needed when it comes to this often neglected area of boxing. . . .The detail Smith provides is impressive. . . .It's fascinating stuff, meticulously researched, and provides a rich history – in and out of the ring – not just for fans but for the ladies who ply their trade in the sport and now have a book they can present to family and friends and say, 'This is who I am and where I come from.' (*The Ring*)

[*A History of Women's Boxing*] will change the way you think about women's boxing. . . .The book is the colorful account of a subculture. . . .fans not only got a taste of what's possible, but what's always been here.

(*The Record*)

This book proves that hitting like a girl is no insult — it's a time-honored position. (*Brooklyn Heights Courier*)

Rowman & Littlefield can be commended for its publication, as it is the first comprehensive treatment of the subject and addresses a considerable gap in the historical literature. It is a generally well-written account that covers the past three hundred years of organized women's bouts in considerable depth. . . .The work is particularly insightful and helpful in detailing the trials and tribulations of early pioneers who confronted both legal and social boundaries as they sought professional status over the last half of the twentieth century. . . .Smith provides extensive coverage of the rise of Christy Martin as a phenomenon in the 1990s, the marketing of Mia St. John as a sex object, and the celebrated career of Laila Ali. On the whole, the book offers a good starting point for further research into the subject of women's boxing. . . .Smith has provided the foundation for the future work of scholars interested in the burgeoning field of women's boxing. (*Journal of Sport History*)

A History of Women's Boxing is a "history first"—a meticulously researched, seriously written yet highly entertaining book about the sport. Author Malissa Smith mined historical databases, newspaper archives, and individual memories to portray a compelling in-depth look at the women of the ring from the early 1700's to the challenges facing female fighters today. Her description of my first mismatched bout in the 1970s could not have been expressed any better and brought back the feelings I had as I stepped out of the ring. The book is no doubt an instant classic in boxing lore and belongs on everyone's shelves! (Sue TL Fox, #1-ranked Super Welterweight in 1979, honored as one of Ring Magazine's Top-Ten Most Influential Female Boxers of All Time)

At last, a comprehensive history of female participation in boxing. These pioneers, past and present, owe Malissa Smith an immense debt of gratitude for bringing them out of the shadows and giving them the exposure they have long deserved for their character, determination, and undeniable strength. (Mischa Merz, author of The Sweetest Thing and owner of Mischa's Boxing Central)

Women have been involved in all aspects of boxing for several hundred years. Their contribution to the sport has been overlooked. Malissa Smith has written an exciting book that brings to light how much women have given to this sport. Once you get started reading, you will not put it down. (Bruce Silverglade, owner of Gleason's Gym)

About the Author
Malissa Smith is an amateur boxer and maintains a popular blog about the sport—*Girlboxing*. She writes frequently on the topic of women's boxing and has appeared as a guest on the radio show *Courts & Sports* to discuss women's boxing history and women's boxing in the Olympics. Smith is a board member of the International Women's Boxing Hall of Fame (IWBHF).

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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