

EXCLUSIVE
by Europe Editor *Iain Axon*

LAW AND DISORDER

LEGAL EAGLE
LAURA MAKES
STRONG CASE
FOR THE
DEFENCE

Maggie Fitzgerald: I seen you looking at me.
Frankie Dunn: Yeah, out of pity.
Maggie Fitzgerald: Don't you say that. Don't you say that if it ain't true. I want a trainer. I don't want charity, and I don't want favours.

Like Maggie Fitzgerald in Oscar-winning *Million Dollar Baby*, Laura Saperstein doesn't want favours and she doesn't want charity. She just wants to make it big in boxing, arguably the hardest and most dangerous sport of them all – and one almost entirely dominated by men.

Yet if Saperstein has her way, it won't just be her topping the bill in a world title fight in New York or Las Vegas, but a whole string of female pugilists who will prove that the fairer sex have a

role to play at boxing's top table. Even in the weird and wonderful world of boxing, Saperstein's story is an extraordinary one.

Born in 1971 in Australia, she was raised on the Far North Coast region of New South Wales where she surfed some of the world's finest waves and stalked the fringes of professional surfing. She was a corporate lawyer in Sydney, then London, earning £75,000 a year and on the wrong side of 30 when she decided to quit her job and concentrate on becoming a professional boxer. It was an unusual career move, especially when only a handful of male professionals are good enough to make a long-term living out of a sport that regularly writes multi-million pound pay cheques at the highest level – but pays peanuts at the lowest. And being female doesn't give Saperstein an excuse to bunk off early morning

roadwork or avoid the rigours of the gym, and just like her male counterparts she has to count the calories to make the 135-pound lightweight limit.

So why make the switch?

"Lawyers were never really my cup of tea anyway," said Saperstein – who has also worked as a journalist and was a talented surfer when she was younger – of her new job.

"As soon as I started boxing I fell in love with it, so I just decided to go for it. My philosophy has always been if you enjoy doing something, then do it.

"I've immersed myself in the sport. This is what I want to do, and I've worked damned hard at

getting where I am today.”

Able to supplement her income with a string of investment properties in London, Saperstein made her professional debut at the Tooting Leisure Centre in November last year, before hard-talking her way on to a show promoted by Frank Maloney, the man who helped Lennox Lewis to the unified world heavyweight title.

Impressed by her ability to generate publicity and shift tickets, Maloney was less upbeat following her fight against the Ukraine’s Olga Varchenko at the start of February, which, had it not been for the sex of the two participants, would have been an instantly forgettable four rounder. But Saperstein, who freely admitted that she wasn’t at her best against Varchenko and was bitterly disappointed she didn’t do better, has spent her short boxing career defying those who have told her she won’t make it.

Her first sparring session reduced her to tears, but she bit down on her gum-shield to see it through to the end, while her coach initially told her he didn’t believe women should be boxing.

Saperstein’s natural defiance is an attitude that still serves her well today. “It’s been very, very difficult,” said Saperstein, who fell in love with boxing after watching a show at the legendary York Hall in London’s East End. Having initially tried kick-boxing, she took up boxing proper a year later in 2004, winning all 10 of her amateur bouts before deciding to take on the professionals.

“I don’t have thick skin and I get hurt when people tell me I won’t make it and say nasty things about me,” she added. “I suppose if you stick your head above the parapet you are going to get people who want to knock it off, but I can’t believe some of the stuff people have come out with. It’s not from other boxers, you’re pretty much accepted when you walk into the gym, but from administrators and officials. When I first started I even had to plan when I was going to the gym to avoid certain people. It’s just extraordinary, and sometimes I can’t quite believe there’s all this fuss. After all, it’s just a woman who wants to box.

“There are lots of people out there who want to see me fail, and a lot of people who have said things without even seeing me box. It’s incredible that people have that attitude. All I’m asking for is a chance to do what I love doing. Showing people that they are wrong is a big motivation.”

In previous incarnations as promoter, manager and trainer, Maloney was one of those who



LAURA KEEN ON DUBAI BOUT

Boxer babe Laura Saperstein is keen to bring her pugilistic talents to the Gulf, initially Dubai.

Her appetite was whet when she heard that Laila Ali was all set to fight in at the tennis stadium in Dubai several years ago.

The superstar of women’s boxing changed her mind because her father, the legendary Muhammad Ali, who has Parkinson’s Disease, was particularly unwell at the time and she didn’t want to leave the US.

“Dubai is the international buzzword when it comes to sport and tourism. Of course I’d box there if suitable arrangements can be made. I’d be interested in some of the other Gulf states too. Qatar is doing amazing things in sport.”



frowned upon women’s boxing. But when Saperstein collared his wife, Tracey, at a black tie dinner and asked for a chance, Maloney finally dropped his previous animosity in a bid for continued domestic bliss. “At first he called me the Bitch from Hell because I was giving him so much hassle,” said Saperstein.

“But now he’s seen the media interest in me, he’s decided to call me “Kid” Saperstein instead!”

Maloney put Saperstein on a British light-heavyweight title bill, and highlights of her bout with Varchenko were shown on Sky Sports, who televised the card. “Tracey told me that I was

being sexist and I should give Laura a go,” said Maloney.

“I began thinking to myself that perhaps I was being unfair if boxing is something that she really wants to do. After all, it’s all down to individual choice. I’m still not convinced that women should be in the boxing ring, but the publicity that Laura has generated has been unbelievable. In the build up to her first fight for me, the phone didn’t stop ringing. Will I carry on promoting her? Let’s see how she fights, and what the public’s reaction is to her contests.”

While she is currently under the charge of



Maloney, one day Saperstein hopes to join the promotional ranks herself, but instead of looking for the next Muhammad Ali, she dreams of finding the equivalent of The Greatest’s daughter, Laila, the most famous female fighter around. “Perhaps there might be a world title opportunity for me one day, but I know that I’ve only got a couple of years at the top because of my age, so promoting is definitely something that interests me down the line,” she said.

“There’s a lack of women in the sport at the moment, and we need more girls doing it to raise the profile. Without the quantity, it’s difficult to make competitive fights that the public are interested in. A male boxer can study videos of his opponents, but I’m lucky if I know anything about who I’ll be boxing at all. I’ve got my own website specifically for female boxers, and since I’ve set it up I’ve had a lot of people sign up to it saying they are interested in the sport.”

Although it feels like a 21st century phenomena, women’s boxing appeared at the 1904 Olympics as a demonstration sport, and first became popular in the USA as long ago as the 1970s. Films like *Million Dollar Baby*, and the success of genuinely skilful fighters like Ali, have forced it more into the mainstream, but there are still regular calls for it to be banned.

Saperstein believes that women’s boxing has suffered from an image problem, with its practitioners trying to ape the worst of their male counterparts. To that end, she is keen to distance herself from the likes of Jane Couch, Britain’s most successful female boxer, but best remembered for hammering away at Michael Barrymore’s ribs on a prime time chat show when an impromptu demonstration got out of hand.

Instead, Saperstein believes that women can retain their feminine side and still attract the paying public.

“I want to send out a positive image to girls who might want to take up boxing,” said Saperstein. “Some female professional boxers have made a mistake in where they have positioned themselves. One of the best known boxers in Britain is Cathy ‘The Bitch’ Brown and a nickname like that doesn’t do anyone any favours. I believe I can be a positive role model.”

At the moment, Britain only has a handful of the 800 or so professional female fighters who ply their trade around the world, but Saperstein firmly believes that will change. “A couple of years ago the Amateur Boxing Association in England believed that they would have around 150 girls registered by 2009, but that figure is now looking to be more like 500,” said Saperstein. There will be more and more girls turning professional, and although it won’t be easy for them, I believe they have a role to play in the future of this sport.”

And you wouldn’t bet against Saperstein being there to give them a helping hand.