



# GENTLEWOMAN BOXER

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Boxing is a way out of poverty for many working class males, and now it is also a way out of boredom for middle class females. Laura Saperstein is taking the sport to a whole new level, with an aggressive marketing campaign designed to titillate and tweak the male ego, whilst stimulating the curiosity glands. Laura is a gentlewoman boxer. She is the complete machine, both fighting and media.



➤ AT 4 PM ON A GRIZZLY SUNDAY IN TOOTING, AN EXPECTANT AUDIENCE SIT ON WOODEN BENCHES, FACING THE COLOURFUL BOXING RING.

A couple of white Londoners sidle up, one of them telling the other that "it's dark in here", making clear he isn't referring to the lighting. The working class, which apparently no longer exist, seem to take on a pretty physical reality when it comes to fighting. The night has seven fights on the bill, all recent pros.

First up is a small tattooed lizard from Hartlepool, punching himself in the head for comfort as he waits for a bellow of music and his opponent to materialise. The fight begins, and the Northern coach bellows ideas to the young fighter: "Go straight, go straight!". When the ideas have ended, he resigns himself to: "Just rough him up Craig!". The referee moves around oozing fat from his thinning white shirt, stuck in the middle.

When it's good, boxing is the most amazing spectator sport in the world. It's an exquisite ballet, and as you watch your shoulder jerks involuntarily,

fading to move from the punch, getting stuck in. You watch the delicate arc of a good punch, the shiver of sweat, the welcomed cushioned thump, the wall of screams, the silence, the ape noises, the frightened jittery dance as the boxers look for a route in, a well landed 1-2, designed and delivered with ferocity. The crowd scream, apparently at the same time, "Be smart," and, "Give it to him". The left jab comes out, exploring, waiting to dock the pain, there's an ambulance outside, it has to be good. The boxers eyeball each other, silence, pin drop, a double jab, a right, a wall of screams. The young pros move quickly, trying to get somewhere, aping the moves, bleeding too easily, ending the contest.

And in steps Laura Saperstein.

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The day before, we spent a day with Laura in her gymnasium in Tottenham. She is in almost peak physical fitness, though she would like to improve a little further, and the three hours gruelling fitness a day is boring. She has never had gout, nor any other disease of good living. She likes to drink champagne.

Ten years ago, Jane Couch took the British Board of Boxing to court, in order to win the right for females to step into the professional ring. She later credited boxing with keeping her out of trouble. She had lived a life of "booze, drugs and street fighting until 26". Cut to ten years later, and Laura Saperstein is a successful commercial lawyer who worked with top class magnate Freshfields, has a property portfolio, and was gripped by boxing as a way out of the corporate brain tedium. It takes all sorts this sport.

Laura wants to create a "different path for women boxers, and a different image from women boxers being

ball breakers." I ask her how she would be viewed by the old school, suggesting all knickers and no trousers. Laura ripostes calling such a characterisation arcane and ridiculous, claiming that "the first female

boxers failed to convert their sport into something with more longevity, failed to convert the first wave of media attention and novelty value".

Cue the jeers from the toothless hordes surrounding the ring, the haters, those who deride women in sport. I ask Laura who the haters are, who is most likely to deride her—women or men. She replies that women keep their opinions more to themselves, and have never felt the need to protest against the pointlessness of golf, but that men are more vocal and might attack the sport.

In response, I accuse her, like a jeering toothless male, of being "all hype and no hit". She freezes into an ice sculpture, just as the photographer tells her to adopt an expression of pure hatred. She invites me to get in

the ring for a few rounds, and see if I feel the hype. I wither like a coward, and decline the invitation for the sparring and the exhaustion, preferring a safe pint.

Laura hopes to be the first female boxer to actually make some money out of it, but she freely admits that it's a lonely sport, and that she can't go out on the City tiles (she has to manage a property portfolio). She misses the zip of City conversation, the polysyllabic murmur, the "intellectual parity" as she calls it. Boxing is no longer a gentlemanly sport, and, as Laura says, "there aren't too many middle class boxers out there".

Laura sculpts her body in the ring for the warm glow of the camera's flash, and the stylist sprays her with glistening liquid. I ask Laura about men, and whether she wants males to be "domineering or supportive".

Pouting, she hits back with, "That's too stupid a question for me to answer". After a pause, she continues thoughtfully: "Men have always

been scared of me, fascinated and often scared, since I'm a strong and determined woman who likes to get her own way". At the same time, Laura admits there has never been a shortage of interested men, and her Facebook profile cheekily admits she is "Single" and "Looking for whatever she can get".

Laura got into boxing when her ex-boyfriend took her to a fight, and she became fascinated with the bodies, the skill, the aesthetics, the intellectual side, the cleverness of working out an opponent. Laura has perfect, pearly white teeth. And now to the ring.

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Sandwiched in the middle of male bouts of increasing weight and deadliness, the women make their appearance. The Bulgarian female fighter, Borislava Goraronanova, walks in with strong masculine facial features but her calves give her away. She takes off her top revealing her sports bra, and the crowd seem accepting. Laura Saperstien makes her entrance

to some heavily bassed up power chords, enters the ring, and delivers two mean mechanical punches into the air.

A dreadlocked Rasta laughs. The fight begins and there is the silent hum as the girls move around each other for about a minute. Then Laura unleashes a punch that makes an almighty slapping sound on female skin, and follows with an impressively aggressive rainstorm of punches. Laura did smite the Bulgarian, and the dreadlocked Rasta is laughing, but now it's because she's better than a man.

The Bulgarian housewife is on the ropes, exhausted. Laura continues to unleash her terrifying mechanical arm. Made of metal and pumping like a steam ship, it keeps on digging. She wins the fight easily, and the Bulgarian is sent back to her country without even

a ripple of polite applause. She looks spent.

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The day before in the gymnasium, the female boxers chatted in between bouts of sparring.

Laura asks a small Asian boxeress if she gets nervous.

"I get nervous before everything, even playing football I'm nervous."

Laura says, "I always thought you were cool."

The Asian boxeress responds, "No, I get really nervous."

Later, the girls get talking about weights, that famed and fated subject of female conversation, the dalliance and the daggers. The girls spend time guessing each other's weight, and complementing each other with real, or simulated, amazement. They help each other out. Laura's coach, a grizzled Londoner, is working on making the women more aggressive.

Despite the very female conversation, I have to remind myself that I am in the training gym watching two girls go at each other, gloves and fist. In my mind, I'm trying to enjoy it, but it pushes against the gentle curves of the female form, to see every muscle

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### ➤ *Tottenham Community Sports Centre*

Tottenham Community Sports Centre is one of the oldest sports centres in London. It was established 30 years ago by a determined band of volunteers, many of whom are still connected with the centre today. Based in converted Territorial Army buildings on Tottenham High Road, opposite Spurs Football Club, the premises are leased from Haringey Council by the Tottenham Community Sports Centre Charitable Trust, a registered charity. A rolling programme of conversion and refurbishment has seen this former T.A. Centre transformed into a valuable resource providing sporting and community activities as well as education and training facilities. It is the policy of the centre to actively encourage cross fertilisation between the various clubs and their activities and in this way continue to build and support the true community spirit.

➤ 701 - 703 Tottenham High Road London N17 8AD





and sinew stretching into an ecstasy of violence, a thumping fist, the dreamy curves twisting into rippling arms of terror, and then returning to female curves. The next day in the professional ring, watching Laura Saperstein is completely different. The pretty face glows and the mechanical arm digs its way to victory.

Time will tell whether Laura will be able to gentrify boxing, like sloaney students gentrify the fried chicken dilapidation and gritty misery of London suburbs. Hers is a crusade for recognition of a new path. It's yet to be seen who will be watching. Certainly the media have been caught by a virus which has resulted in TV crews being mercilessly dispatched. Plastic phenomenon or lasting venture, only time will tell. ✱

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