

The Telegraph Women Sport



**We've conquered
Europe, now
for the world**
Rachel Daly
on England's
new mission

Boxing boom helps grass roots prosper

Super-fights such as Shields v Marshall are enabling clubs to grow numbers and improve lives outside ring. By *Yolanthe Fawehinmi*

Claressa Shields's brilliant victory over Savannah Marshall to become the undisputed middleweight champion at London's O2 Arena this month was a landmark night for women's boxing. The bout headlined an 11-fight, women-only card and came at a time when women's boxing is rapidly on the rise.

The fight perfectly illustrated that the idea boxing is not for women has been dealt a right hook over the past 10 years and not just in the professional ranks. According to a Sport England survey there were 17 per cent more regular women boxers in 2020 compared to 2015, with as many as 420,400 women involved, while England Boxing disclosed figures showing a 65 per cent growth in female membership since 2017, despite the pandemic.

One such new entrant into the ring is Mary-Kate Smith. The 18-year-old from Shrewsbury has been boxing since 2019 and 11 months ago stumbled across a women's only boxing class at Telford Amateur Boxing Club. Thankfully, having ignored advice that "boxing isn't really for girls", Smith has since found the sport to be hugely beneficial to all aspects of her life.

"Boxing takes up so much of your mental headspace, so it helps to clear my mind," she says. "I love the people I have met [at the gym], especially my coaches who have taught me so much. They are like my second family."

Smith has been nicknamed MK47 by her coaches, due to the promise shown in the ring, and has benefited from the women's only classes, run by Boxwise, a non-profit social enterprise that helps young people build confidence and improve their health and well-being through boxing.



Role models: Claressa Shields (left) and Savannah Marshall go toe to toe at the O2 this month; (left) a young girl taking part in the Boxwise programme

As the former WBA female super-welterweight champion and also a Boxwise ambassador, Hannah Rankin has seen the growth of women's boxing from both professional and amateur corners of the ring. The Scottish boxer came to the sport in her early twenties, after her

mother died from cancer, and it quickly became her discipline of choice.

"There haven't always been female role models who are accessible in sport, but thanks to social media, television and promoters pushing women's boxing to the forefront, we are seeing more young girls pick up their gloves," 32-year-old Rankin says.

Boxwise, set up by former public servant Richard Ogden and philanthropist Nick Maughan,

works with accredited England Boxing coaches in safe and controlled environments.

"When I first attended a class I was so nervous and brought all my mates with me, because I didn't want to make any new friends here. But now some of my closest friends are all here," Kaci-Louise Parkes, another Telford Boxwise participant, says. "It's helped so much with my mental health. It's a second home and helps when I'm having a bad day."

The Telford gym may be a world away from Shields v Marshall at the O2, but no less important.

"The stigma that women aren't as strong as men or that women's boxing isn't watchable is tiresome," Ogden says. "We've also started going into primary and secondary schools to teach boxing to girls only classes. We shouldn't need to have these separate classes where girls can box safely, but I don't think we are there yet as a culture or society."

Two blockbuster fights show this is just the start

By Gareth A Davies

Time was when there was little chance of women headlining boxing events, let alone selling out arenas or being the leading protagonists in pay-per-view events. In 1998, Blackpool boxer Jane Couch took the British Boxing

Board of Control to the High Court, to challenge restraint of trade and defy so-called medical evidence that women were not physically designed to take punches, in order to obtain a licence.

In the United States, around the same time, veteran promoter Bob Arum was attempting to turn Mia St John into a pay-per-view star.

St John had brawn, brains and looks. She had a degree in psychology and, in 1999, even appeared on the cover of *Playboy*.

Arum placed St John on the undercard of Oscar De La Hoya fights, when he was one of the best-known boxers in the US. But Top Rank, Arum's promotional outfit, was never able to break through into the mainstream and garner popular appeal for her. The *Playboy* cover backfired, too. St John was labelled the "busty bunny boxer" in media circles.

Back in the UK, Couch won her case and made her debut at

Caesars, a sticky-floored nightclub in Streatham. I covered it, and Couch stopped Simona Lukic in two rounds. But the paradigm has shifted over the past decade.

At London 2012, Nicola Adams, Katie Taylor and Claressa Shields all won Olympic gold medals. Public perception shifted and, in lockdown, with a captive audience, interest grew.

This year, two huge female fight events prove that the age of women's boxing has truly arrived.

One involved Taylor and Amanda Serrano in April, who became the first women to headline at Madison

Square Garden, New York. It sold out and more than a million watched the fight, a thriller, on digital platform DAZN.

Then, less than two weeks ago, at the O2 Arena, an all-female card headlined by Shields and Savannah Marshall produced another classic. The arena was full – made up of a new audience – and there were two million viewers on Sky Sports.

This is just the start. There are tweaks to be made – more rounds, longer rounds, more research to be completed – but women's boxing has arrived. It will only get exponentially bigger, year on year.