

Laura Saperstein

Boxergirl!

From the courtroom to the canvas, Laura 'Boxergirl' Saperstein keeps knocking em' down. Joe Holroyd went to meet the latest big pull in women's boxing.



The corporate lawyer is a testosterone-fuelled, adversarial creature. Driving his opponent relentlessly to the ropes, he dispassionately sculpts his career out of first round KO's in the courtroom. This masculine environment offers fertile (almost clichéd!) ground for boxing metaphors. Inevitably enough then, white-collar boxing has - if not always making for the highest-calibre fights - proved popular and has certainly made great quality headlines as the latest fad for city-boys.

Altogether less clichéd - indeed, something of an original - is the prospect of a smart, sexy, female corporate lawyer turned pro-boxer. Laura 'Boxergirl' Saperstein is exactly that.

In 2003, Saperstein was working as a mergers and acquisitions lawyer, earning in excess of £75000 a year. A friend asked her along to a kickboxing class for moral support. She went along. She loved it. She hasn't looked back, and after an unbeaten record of 10 fights as an amateur which took her to British lightweight champion status, she debuted as a professional at York Hall last month.

Growing up on a farm in Australia, living the outdoor life, riding horses, Saperstein was, in her own words 'a tearaway kid' who didn't wear shoes till she was in high school: it was a free-spirited life. This lasted well into her teens, when she started surfing competitively. 'It was hard back then, a bit like female boxing is: surfing wasn't seen as a thing girls should do. But I competed until I was 22, then I found myself at university, but there was no money in surfing, so I stopped surfing in favour of the academic route.'

Saperstein's easygoing conversational style can be misleading: she didn't merely find herself at university; this was no default option for a pampered rich-girl. Beneath the friendly, feminine (and not entirely unattractive!) exterior lurks a serious intellect and a seriously tenacious spirit. Working as a TV reporter to finance herself throughout her university-years, Laura followed-up a Communications degree with a first-class honours in Law. Winning various scholarships and student competitions en route, in her own words: 'I worked my arse off!'



*“I left the all-nighters,
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”*



'How did I end up in London then? After 7 1/2 years of studying, when Freshfields called me up and asked if I wanted a top-salaried job in London, I was like 'Hell yeah!' And so she was headhunted and then brought over to London by top corporate law-firm Freshfields. 'At first I didn't know anyone, I thought I would hate it; I was more into warmth and surfing! I just came to earn good money.' But something about England grabbed her. 'I was caught-up in it, it was exciting, it was challenging. I was doing multi-million pound transactions with Freshfields in Europe and London!' But towards the end of her time at Freshfields -

by which stage she was effectively heading-up their legal-team for Mergers and Acquisitions - she had started to become disillusioned with the job.

'Throughout that time I was pretty much the only woman in board-meetings; you know 10 middle-aged blokes around a table and me... especially because of my hippie upbringing I was a bit of a fish out of water; it was like a foreign world!' Despite obvious similarities here with the sometimes less-than-equal role of women in boxing, Saperstein nonetheless found the sweat-stained gym environment to be a real breath of fresh air.



'The lack of pretension and airs in boxing, it was so gritty, so different to the corporate world - it was appealing.' I first met Laura whilst training alongside her in Camden, 2003, and she speaks fondly of her time spent under former Golden Gloves boxing Champion & 5th Dan Kickboxing instructor Keith Wilson. I couldn't help but notice how hard she hit the pads back then, and she credits Keith with more than a small hand in inspiring her to move from the pads to the professional ring. 'I started at Albany Kickboxing in Camden with Keith Wilson. Keith's sensei-ness, his calming approach... Keith was like a father-figure to me, he gives you so much encouragement; you felt rewarded for your courage and determination. He had an ethos that I value: you're rewarded and encouraged for how much you give of yourself to the sport, not for your talent or looks. The environment was simplistic and unpretentious and that was appealing. To have that family feeling was important because I was far away from home and family. I was being encouraged for something I was good at - given a sense of having something in her life. I guess I was looking for what a lot of young men are looking for in boxing - somewhere to earn respect; somewhere to work hard and to fit in.'

Turning her back on the £75,000+ salary was easy for Saperstein: 'I left the all-nighters, stuck under fluorescent lights, drafting 3-inch thick contracts behind' And while the job did have its intellectual challenges, she's surprised it doesn't drive more people to violence!

But, despite her evident passion for the sport, Saperstein is under no illusions as to the nature of the boxing game. When I raise the subject of her signing to Frank Maloney, despite his stated distaste for women in Boxing, Saperstein is forthright about her understanding of his motivation: 'Media attention and money. Simple as that. Mainstream Media have taken an interest in me; that's why Maloney signed me.'

Suggesting that - as a former TV presenter and lawyer - she must have more know-how of the media environment than your average fighter or, indeed, your average manager, Saperstein nods enthusiastically. 'I've worked in the media so I get on with journalists - I'm into the same things. It's exciting to work with media people. We're into the same things, the same books... I chat to journalists and think "These are some of my own types". You develop a relationship with the reporters - before the last fight the reporters from the Daily Mail were texting me to wish me good luck and everything... it was great.'

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lurks a serious intellect
and a seriously tenacious spirit”*

ROLL ON GIRLPOWER!

LAURA SAPERSTEIN



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Boxergirl

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This is an unusual line to take with the press - not always at the top of every fighter's wish-list! But perhaps Saperstein is an individual with whom one should expect the unexpected. I suggest that there is perhaps something of the outsider to the roles she has adopted in life; something of an observer, someone on the periphery; the aforementioned 'fish out of water': looking-in on a world she understands but perhaps would not naturally inhabit in the ordinary run of things. She's experienced being an outside observer first as a journalist, then as a corporate female and latterly as a woman in boxing.

'That's right, and it makes a nice easy story because it's a novelty story, but then people start to see how hard it is to get taken seriously in the Pro Boxing game for a woman and this has generated sympathy.' But, wary of any element of self-pity (and perhaps also wary of my rather contrived boxing vs journalism metaphor!) realist Saperstein returns to Maloney: 'Coming back to Maloney- he saw an opportunity to

get some publicity for himself. I don't think he cared what the result was!'

A ring-savvy, spoiling opponent making a tough job of it for Saperstein in her last outing, 'Boxergirl' still won emphatically and will be boxing again in April. 'My most immediate goal is to shut the critics up! I have had some horrible publicity; real negative stick since my last fight.' From the start it has been hard to get the fights. Whatever people think of my ability my fights have been good fights.' Her own appraisal of the fight is far more scathing than mine: 'For the first national media fight it was a bad fight, and in front of Maloney - it was awful.'

I suggest to Saperstein that, if I've perceived anything, it is that she relishes a challenge? 'Yeah, but sometimes it's all too much and I just want to run away! I'm not going to give up. It had never occurred to me before that when people stick their heads out there that people want to cut them off.' And so the fighting spirit emerges; tightening her

defence following a hurtful attack, Saperstein is determined: 'I've realised now I can't be too dependent for happiness and satisfaction on what other people think. Think of Junior Witter - people used to slag him off, now they support him.' Indeed, now they're slagging-off Ricky Hatton because they claim he is ducking Witter! It's a fickle game, but no-more-so than the corporate one, and Saperstein certainly has the steely temperament to see it through.

'Hopefully I'll have a good one next time, and then I want to move up to 6-rounders. We'll see how we go from there. Life changes, you never know what the next opportunity will be!' She'd certainly put those white-collar boxers on their arse - in the boardroom or the ring; watch this space.

Laura's next fight is on the 18th of April in London.

For tickets and details visit www.laurasaperstein.com

