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Laura Saperstein reveals how she went from corporate life as a lawyer to sporting life as a boxer

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Laura Saperstein

Corporate law is a tough business. The hours are long and the backbiting is vicious. It's no surprise then that at the age of 32, Laura Saperstein walked out on her job at a prestigious London law firm. But her new career is more brutal than anything she left behind. For it's no longer in the courtroom where Laura, 36, is plying her trade; it's in the boxing ring. Sarah Shephard meets the Queen of the ring.

Arriving at Laura's home in Tottenham, I am a little nervous. I'm in a strange part of town-made stranger by the fact I'm an Arsenal supporter-and I'm about to meet an ex-lawyer turned professional boxer- a combination which would worry most people, I think. But my nerves dissipate as soon as the front door is opened by Laura's housemate. A shadowy figure darts across the landing at the top of the stairs dressed in jeans and bra with a towel wrapped around her head. "Hi Sarah," Laura shouts down at me. "Sorry, I'm running a bit late. I'll be ready in a sec!" Typical female, I think. Then I remember, she's hardly typical at all.

I know everyone must ask you this, but why leave law behind for boxing?

There are so many answers to that question. It wasn't a conscious choice, it just grabbed me and I couldn't resist it. I went to a kickboxing class with a friend and I got completely addicted to the punching. And also to the gym and the lifestyle of it; the discipline involved and the community feeling that I got. I started going a lot and it almost felt like my body was designed for it. But at the time I never thought I could have taken it anywhere.

So what happened to change that? When did you realize you could do something really productive with the sport?

A few months after I started training my coach called me into his office and said 'would you like

to actually box?' I was just like how could I? Is there some amateur thing I could do? I was just dumbstruck. It was the most outlandish thing he could say. But then he asked how old I was and I said 32. He said 'yeah, you are a bit old.' It planted the seed in my mind though and I started looking for a boxing gym. But it's such a male dominated environment that I was too scared to even go into one for a long time. I think a lot of girls feel like that.

And London was a fairly alien environment to you anyway, wasn't it? When did you move from Australia?

I came over here 7 years ago, for work. The law firm recruited me and paid for me to come over, put me in the service department and set everything up-the bank account, all that stuff. But I grew up on a farm in Australia. So I'm completely on the other side of the world to my family and all my old friends and anything that I knew of a community.

Did you grow up around lots of Jews?

Not at all, I was brought up without any religion at all really. My grandfather was Jewish but a communist, so he wasn't religious and my father's mother died when he was one year old. The when dad was 12, his father was killed and he grew up as an orphan at a boarding school. This was in South Africa at the time of the Second World War when there was a lot of anti-Semitism. So his only real experience of being Jewish was to be harassed.

How much of his past did he explain to you?

It was something that came up in his later life as a really big issue. My dad had Alzheimer's and towards the end it got worse and worse. He would cry ten times a day, one of the major triggers being his religion, and being taunted for it. To me, being Jewish carried no stigma whatsoever; no one had ever made me feel that way. But they had obviously made him feel like that and it was buried, deeply. It wasn't until the end of his life that it came out, and it really shocked me.

Since moving to London then, have you discovered Judaism as well as boxing?

Well I've got Jewish friends now, but being Jewish is something that I'm still a complete novice in. The first time I'd ever heard of Shabbat - am I even saying it right? - was with my friend Louisa. She invited me to dinner at her parents' house in Primrose Hill and they do the whole deal on a Friday night. So I went there a couple of times and thought I quite fancy this!

Is that why you got involved with Maccabi GB? To learn more about the traditions you've missed out on?

I got the strong sense from the guys at Maccabi that an important part of what they do involves community and identity. Although when I went for the interview with Maccabi GB to discuss whether they should sponsor me...boy I tell you. It was harder than any job interview I've ever had. I had to justify in every way why they should



support me. But I think they understood that one of the main reasons I want to be involved is because I want to learn about my heritage and have that sense of community. They're going to have to teach me though.

"To me, being Jewish carried no stigma whatsoever; no one had ever made me feel that way"

You'll have to start at Blooms with a salt beef sandwich. Every London based Jew should have ticked that box...

I've never eaten at Blooms, but I've had the salt beef sandwich. I'm looking forward to being introduced to all those things. I've got one friend who's Jewish but I hope that will change, especially with all the projects I'm getting involved with. The BBC is running a schools project where they get kids to present TV pieces and they're involved with two Jewish schools. The Jewish girls' school chose to do a piece

about me, so I'm going there to be interviewed by the kids. Plus Maccabi want to involve me in their healthy living programme and run a competition where Jewish girls come to meet me and I run a training session with them.

Their parents will be thrilled! What does your own mum make of your new profession?

I think my mum's really scared to watch the video of my last fight. After my first professional bout her comment was "I'm taking two valium and going to bed for the day." But she doesn't understand, I'm not going to get hurt. To me boxing brings health and fitness, good eating and discipline-all these positive things-into my life. Look at my face, I've not been damaged. Am I scared of getting hurt? Nah. Hand on heart; I've never had a punch from a girl that's bothered me.

Laura's next professional fight is on April 18 at the York Hall in Bethnal Green, east London.