

THE ONE AND ONLY...

Sarah Shepherd meets Laura Saperstein, a woman with a mind – and a career – all her own.

Originality is a rare thing these days. Films frequently derive from books, which themselves are based on real-life tales. And new music is not quite as new as it was the first time we heard it from the Beatles/Rolling Stones/Beach Boys. So it's refreshing when a truly original story comes to light. A story like this one perhaps, about the corporate lawyer (female), who, four years ago at the age of 32, simply walked away from a £75,000 per year salary and a generous expense account.

For something better paid and less stressful? Not exactly.

Laura Saperstein chose a career which actually pays significantly less, and requires a great deal more dedication than her 12 hour days in the city ever did. But the former lawyer considers it a straightforward switch, from the courtroom to the boxing ring.

"It wasn't a conscious choice, it just grabbed me and I couldn't resist it," explains Laura when I ask the question you're all pondering. Why?

I mean, we've all had that Monday morning feeling at some point. Those 'I've had enough of this' thoughts that follow a bad day at the office. But that's usually as far as it goes for most of us: thoughts. Saperstein acted on them, in the ruthlessly decisive manner that you might expect of a woman emerging from the no-nonsense world of corporate law.

What you might not expect though, is the somewhat frazzled female I find when arriving at her home for our interview. As her housemate lets me in the front door, a half-dressed Laura – with hair still wrapped in a towel – shouts, from the upstairs landing, her apologies for running late. And when she does emerge, fully clothed and blow-dried, she's a lot smaller than I expected... although there is a definite solidity to her physique which suggests that, were I to aim my hardest punch at her midriff, she might feel a slight tickle, but nothing more.

Laura tells me she "wasn't that fit" when a friend invited her to give kickboxing a try, but that she gradually started to feel as though her body was somehow "designed for it". The punching and the lifestyle became like





Laura Saperstein getting the better of Ukrainian opponent Olena Varchenko earlier this year. Picture: Louise Klein

an “addiction”, and she relished the discipline required, in terms of both training and nutrition. As a native Australian who had only moved to Britain a year or so earlier, the ‘community feeling’ Laura gained from her gym and her training partners lured her in still further. So when a coach later made the suggestion that she should “actually box,” there was no going back. “I was dumbstruck” she laughs. “It was the most outlandish thing he could say, but it planted the seed in my mind...”

...A seed which convinced Laura to search for a boxing gym, where as a 32 year old female, she would feel at ease and be taken seriously. No easy task. Traditionally, these are male-dominated environments where the

muscle-bound go toe-to-toe amid pools of sweat. The professional boxer now sitting opposite me admits to initially being "too scared to even go into one," but, hardly the type to throw in the towel, she soon found the Tottenham gym where her addiction really took hold. "Once I got more into it I couldn't resist" she says, eyes sparkling with enthusiasm. So it was game over for the law career; dealt a knockout blow by a ruthless Saperstein punch, like so many of her future opponents.

"People thought I was pretty nuts," Laura replies, when I ask about the reaction from friends and family to her drastic career change. "Boxing is traditionally seen as being a way out of poverty; you don't see too many Eton boys out there on the pro-boxing scene, do you?" You can't argue with her (she was once a lawyer after all). But how, then, does she explain her attraction to the sport, when she was settled in what she admits was a "prestigious" career?

"Women go into it for totally different reasons," she argues. "There are far more professionals in women's boxing than in men's." This could indicate complex psychological differences between the sexes, of course, but a more likely explanation is the massive divide between men's and women's boxing, in terms of both profile and popularity.

It's this gap which means that, until 1998, the British Boxing Board of Control refused to licence women's boxing, and that even now, the sport is still not considered worthy of inclusion in the Olympics. It's not only the authorities who are against it, either; many high profile boxing commentators have also dismissed female fighters for their perceived lack of skill in the ring. Frank Maloney, known as one of the country's most successful boxing promoters, who managed former heavyweight champion Lennox Lewis for 12 years, is one such critic, and a vocal one at that. "Anyone who wants to watch women fight shouldn't be given the vote" is just one example from Maloney's back catalogue, which also features "the only reason for women to be in the ring is as ring card girls."

But Frank Maloney is a shrewd businessman as well as an unashamed chauvinist, with one eye forever trained on spotting his next money-making opportunity. It must be this that explains the phone call Laura received at the start of 2008 from Maloney himself – offering to make her the first female ever to be signed to his prestigious 'stable' of fighters.

"I had the shock of my life," squeals Laura, describing the conversation that injected life into one of her 'big ticket dreams' – a major promoter featuring women on a top billing. Her remaining aspirations – "winning a world title and being the



first female on the cover of *Boxing News*" – might have to wait a little longer, unfortunately.

Despite her recognition of Maloney's pulling power, the pair are not what you would term 'friendly'. In fact, when I ask Laura what her promoter has been like to work with, she responds instantly: "vile." I'm surprised by her bluntness; after all, it can't be wise to bad mouth the same man who is responsible for booking your venues, finding your opponents and selling the tickets to your fights. But, as she admits, it's "a marriage of convenience," where both parties stand to gain: him, in terms of profit and her, in terms of profile.

So for the time being, Laura chooses to ignore the disparaging mutterings coming from her own corner of the ring. Sadly they're a necessary part of her battle to prove that women's boxing is here to stay. That's the fight that intimidates her the most, though, as she wails in exasperation: "I'm carrying the whole reputation of women's boxing on my shoulders."

This pressure won't ease any time soon, I fear, but I'm also absolutely certain that Laura Saperstein has the strength – both of shoulders and of mind – to cope. "I know the criticism isn't true," she says determinedly. "I won all my amateur fights, my first two professional fights, and if the next one goes the way I think it will, I'll be getting an entirely different set of comments." Her self-belief is infectious, and as I head home, I'm convinced that Frank Maloney has finally met his match in this sharply focused 36 year old. So it looks like she won't be going back to the office any time soon. That's a shame for her former boss; with her powers of persuasion she must have been one hell of a lawyer. ■

Laura Saperstein's next fight takes place on 18 April at
York Hall, Bethnal Green, E2.
See www.laurasaperstein.com for ticket details.