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Stereotypes, Discrimination, and Impression Management Among Women Professional Boxers

Christy Halbert

Women have traditionally been credited only with marginal roles in the sport of boxing, even though they have competed as pugilists since the late 1880s. The author interviewed 12 women professional boxers in the United States in an effort to understand their position as athletes who compete in a sport considered deviant for women. This revealed that women pugilists face discrimination at gyms and in competitions, are aware of numerous stereotypes as a result of their participation in a deviant sport, and use several strategies to manage their identity in an effort to remain marketable in the industry. They are aware of the need for balance of a public identity that appears neither too masculine nor too feminine. This balance is done in an effort to avoid negative sanctions and thus improve chances of becoming a successful professional boxer.

Women’s participation in professional boxing has traditionally been relegated to the role of caregiver or sideline supporter as mother, wife, girlfriend, or entertainer (as in the case of “ring-girls”—women who dance or hold ring-cards between rounds). In spite of women’s participation as professional pugilists since as early as 1876 (Guttmann, 1991), women boxers traditionally have not been taken seriously. Promotion of women’s fights has ranged from sporadic to nonexistent, with few opportunities for women to compete seriously and on a regular basis. In short, women’s participation as professional boxers has been limited, and the popularity of women’s boxing pales in comparison to the popularity of men’s boxing. Despite this, women have begun to challenge traditions that marginalized their role in the sport—women are now making careers as professional prizefighters.

This case study examines the experiences of women professionally involved in what some consider the most “masculine” of all sports: boxing (Csizma, Wittig, & Schurr, 1988). Women boxers’ experience is unique—it reflects a blend of experiences similar to those of both male pugilists and

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other female athletes. I argue that through competing in an activity perceived as deviant for women, female professional boxers experience both discrimination and stereotyping, leading them to employ myriad strategies of impression management. In addition, I suggest that discrimination and stereotypes of women prizefighters arise from the perceived “triple threat” they pose to social order, sport, and the boxing industry.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Very little is known about the history of women prizefighters. Reports of women’s boxing can be found in early 19th-century London, and accounts of women pugilists in France and England also include their exploits at fairs and carnivals, although these were likely not regular events (Guttmann, 1991; Sammons, 1990). The first professional women’s match recorded in the United States took place in 1876, when Nell Saunders defeated Rose Harland in New York (Guttmann, 1991). By 1905, boxing had gained enough social acceptance as a form of exercise for women to make the beauty column of New York’s Evening World, which suggested that “The Model Maid Will Help Her Health By Boxing” (Heinz, 1961). This interest did not last long, however, and did not seem to significantly increase popularity or acceptance of women prizefighters. The popularity of women’s boxing did increase in the 1940s and 1950s, yet women’s status as professional fighters remained insignificant, and interest shortly diminished. When the popularity of women’s prizefighting again waxed in the early 1970s and 1980s, women boxers attempted (with some success) to make names for themselves and gain respect as boxers. Quickly, though, the popularity of these fighters declined, making room for the most recent (and seemingly most impressive) surge of women’s pugilistic participation, beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The current popularity of women’s professional boxing is marked by their introduction into the amateur ranks,1 promotional contracts with big-name promoters, and increased media coverage (including the recent cover of Sports Illustrated).

Research conducted on boxing has neglected women boxers, and studies on the experiences of female athletes omit women who participate in the sport. For this exploration I have drawn on the literature of men’s professional boxing and studies of female athletes to develop a starting place for understanding the unique position of women prizefighters. In addition, my analysis will incorporate concepts from labeling theory and identity management literature. Similar to some other work in the sociology of sport, this article draws heavily on symbolic interactionism.

MEN’S BOXING

The bulk of boxing research focuses on issues of exploitation and social strain (disadvantaged youths’ attraction to boxing). In 1952, Weinberg and Arond conducted the first sociological study of boxers, in which they discovered that professional boxers2 are usually young urban men or adolescents
from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who often share a history of street fighting, an attraction to the money and prestige associated with professional boxing life, or an awareness of or connection to a boxer in their community or family. In addition, they found that the boxing subculture exhibited high degrees of stratification between boxers, trainers, managers, and promoters. Trainers polish boxers' skills. Managers, who schedule fights with promoters, directly control boxers' careers and often are perceived by boxers as being interested in "the money first and the man second" (Weinberg & Arond, 1952, p. 466). Consistent with this perception, Weinberg and Arond found that the majority of managers regard boxing as a business and the fighter as a commodity and indeed are concerned mainly with making money. Managers operate between the boxer and the promoter, and their dependence on both often leads them to secure their relationships with boxers by lending them money. Managers are essential to boxers because they schedule the paying matches, but they often exploit the boxer to turn a profit by overbooking a fighter, overmatching him with superior fighters, forcing him to fight before he is in prime condition, and sometimes encouraging "fixed" fights in which a boxer is instructed to lose.

Although a boxer's manager may have the greatest direct impact on a prizefighter in men's and women's boxing, promoters are at the highest level of the hierarchy (see Figure 1) and are concerned foremost with the "show," regardless of the boxer's welfare. For instance, promoters are most interested in boxers who are "crowd pleasers" because these fighters draw the biggest crowds. Often promoters demand a percentage of a manager's "cut" of a good fighter. The relationship between manager and promoter often determines a boxer's career. In sum, Weinberg and Arond (1952) found that boxers are vulnerable to several factors affecting their careers, which include structural constraints of upward mobility (promoter's business deals), as well as interactions with promoters, managers, and especially trainers driven by their own profit motives.

Other researchers also have focused on the exploitative structure that underlies professional boxing, with particular attention to the impact such a structure has on Black boxers (Hare, 1971; Sugden, 1987; Wacquant, 1992). Hare (1971) argues that boxers "emerge from the most oppressed strata within the major cities and excite widespread attention as the most exploited group within the athletic world" (p. 2). Boxing demographics traditionally mirror the changes in ethnic composition of members of urban lower strata: At the turn of the century, the Irish dominated boxing; by 1928, Jewish boxers had succeeded them; by 1936, Italian boxers moved to the forefront; and since 1948, Blacks have dominated the sport (Hare, 1971; Sugden, 1987; Wacquant, 1992; Weinberg & Arond, 1952). In 1971, Blacks comprised more than 70% of all boxers (Hare, 1971). Some suggest that with changes in urban demographics, Latinos are now challenging Blacks for domination of the sport (Sugden, 1987). This ethnic tradition, coupled with prevalent racism, provides a foundation for the "great white hope" phenomenon to emerge and thrive in the United States (Hare, 1971).
In his study of Black boxers in Chicago, Hare (1971) found that, overall, boxing proved to be positive for some men, “allowing them to escape the deprivation of the slums, but for most, it merely reflects and aggravates their basic oppression” (p. 8). Similarly, Sugden (1987) argues that the “exploitation of disadvantage” (p. 208) leads to the practice of intentionally locating the ghetto boxing gym in the center of urban poverty so that managers can recruit raw street-fighting talent. Wacquant’s (1992) “sociology of pugilism” describes the boxing gym as a place nurtured and held together “by definite social forces and cultural repertoires [and that it] arises and reproduces itself both as reflections of and reaction against street culture” (p. 225).

WOMEN ATHLETES

Although this is not reflected in the dearth of available literature on women boxers, since the late 1970s, there has been a dramatic increase in research concerned with the gendered experiences of female athletes. The majority of this work has been historical and comparative analyses of women’s and men’s sport opportunities, including the discrimination that many female athletes encounter (see Birrell, 1988; Kutner, 1975; Pottker & Fishel, 1976); surveys of women’s experiences competing in athletics (see Duff & Hong, 1989; Spreitzer, Snyder, & Kivlin, 1978; Warren, Stanton, & Blassing, 1990); and the exploration of issues surrounding stereotypes and labeling (see Boutilier & SanGiovanni, 1983; Eitzen & Zinn, 1990; Hargreaves, 1986; Watson, 1987). For this analysis, sport research addressing
the core concepts of labeling (see Cahn, 1993), stigma (see Blinde & Taub, 1992a; Theberge, 1993), and identity management (see Blinde & Taub, 1992b; Duff & Hong, 1984, 1989) specifically add to this understanding of the experiences of women professional boxers.

Labeling and impression management emerge out of socially defined deviance. According to Howard Becker (1963), people are labeled as deviant when they do not conform to conventional norms and values. Deviance "is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an 'offender'" (Becker, 1963, p. 9). Even some normative behaviors are considered deviant when the activity becomes excessive or particularly intense (Ewald & Jiobu, 1985). Becker explains that negative sanctions (either formal or informal) are punishments for people who disobey social rules. Threats to conventional or traditional society result in the use of labels, stereotypes, and stigma in an effort to control the behavior of the person identified as deviant (Goffman, 1963; Gusfield, 1967). As a reaction to negative sanctions, people labeled as deviant often attempt to manage their public identity in an effort to eliminate the deviant label (Goffman, 1959).

Successful athletes (whether female or male) are active, strong, aggressive, ambitious, and competitive. Women who exhibit athleticism, however, are sometimes perceived by others as maintaining a position that challenges the "boundaries of femininity" (Blinde & Taub, 1992a). Thus women athletes threaten traditional norms by violating gender-appropriate behavior that often results in stereotypes, labels, and stigmatization designed to identify and sanction those defined as problematic (see Blinde & Taub, 1992a; Disserttrain & Weiss, 1988; Nelson, 1994; Sabo, 1988). Although women who participate in other activities considered nontraditional for women are identified as deviant and thus negatively sanctioned, the label of deviant is often highlighted among women in athletics. In sport, Nancy Theberge (1993) suggests negative sanctions are reactions to "the increasing involvement and improving performance of women athletes [that] pose a threat to the advantages men have historically gained from their near exclusive access to and control of the world of sport" (p. 312). This challenge to men's position is also met with structural sex discrimination and sexual harassment, which may take the form of homophobic harassment (Lenskyj, 1990; Masteralexis, 1995; Nelson, 1994).

Erving Goffman (1963) suggests that control of personal information is the key to identity management among people labeled as deviant. In their study of female athletes, Elaine Blinde and Diane Taub (1992b) found that women athletes internalize social stereotypes. Even those "falsely accused" as deviant employ techniques to manage their public identity. Concealment of information, deflection of characteristics perceived as harmful, and normalization of the stigmatized behavior were used to manage the lesbian label. The connection between athleticism and lesbianism, which historically has been a concern in the United States, follows a belief in the myth of the masculinization and mannishness of athletic women (Boutilier &
SanGiovanni, 1983; Cahn, 1993). The lesbian label, in particular, given the homophobic structure of U.S. society, serves as an impressive agent of social control over women athletes (Blinde & Taub, 1992a; Cahn, 1993), and some sexual harassment is directed specifically toward lesbian athletes (Lenskyj, 1990). Labeling sportswomen as lesbians stems from the conception that sports-minded women are deviant and is tied to other stereotypes that focus on women athletes’ appearance. Negative labels lead many people to adopt tactics used to dispel or dissuade such stereotypes. For instance, strategies of identity management for female athletes might include (a) withdrawing from social situations that demand feminine role behavior; (b) integrating the orientation of the athletic role into other social situations; (c) emphasizing the use of feminine accessories, including makeup and jewelry; (d) deemphasizing the importance of athletic achievement; and (e) choosing sports less stigmatized or dropping out of sports when gender-role conflict becomes too great (Blinde & Taub, 1992b; Dissertrain & Weiss, 1988). Similarly, for women in bodybuilding (another sport perceived as deviant for women), identity management strategies may include neutralization techniques such as a “claim of [personal] benefit” from the sport, “blasting” of critics who condemn their participation in the sport, and “basking in the reflected glory” of glamorized women in the sport (Duff & Hong, 1989, p. 517). Because negative labels can result in less marketability, women professional athletes often have emphasized femininity (read soft and ladylike), in effect suggesting that even serious athletes still can be considered “a lady” or “sexy” (Boutilier & SanGiovanni, 1983). Like women professional athletes in general, then, women professional boxers consider this potential effect on their careers as they strive to market themselves both as quality athletes (boxers) and “real” (socially accepted) women.

WOMEN IN PROFESSIONAL BOXING

Perhaps the mainstream view of women boxers is best expressed by Joyce Carol Oates (1987), author and boxing aficionado, who points out

in any case, raw aggression is thought to be the peculiar province of men, as nurturing is the peculiar province of women. The female boxer violates this stereotype and cannot be taken seriously—she is parody, she is cartoon, she is monstrous. (p. 73)

The current status of women pugilists indicates that Oates’s assessment may be widely held. Although women’s professional boxing traces back more than 100 years, women professional boxers have not gained the same recognition or been afforded the same opportunities to compete as male boxers. In fact, they also have been unable to make the same strides in garnering the right to compete that women who participate in many other sports have achieved.

Boxing is a sport industry conceptualized as aggressive, brutal, bloody, and corrupt. The sheer violence of the sport is, for some, its draw, although
its appropriateness as a sporting event has been called into question by others. Violence, in virtually any form, is linked with masculinity (Kaufman, 1987). The myth of men's "natural" inclination toward violence, along with the social construction of masculinity, supports violent sports as the exclusive domain of men. Men use sports as a terrain for testing, proving, displaying, or enhancing masculinity (Whitson, 1990), where even injury can be perceived as masculinizing (Young & White, 1995). The same battleground of machismo has been said about boxing—"a purely masculine activity [that] inhabits a purely masculine world" (Oates, 1987, p. 70). Not surprisingly, women pugilists have not held a place in this exclusively masculine world.

Thus women professional boxers operate from a starting point where their participation in the sweet science of bruising is called into question for at least two reasons. The fact that women prizefighters are simultaneously departing from traditional normative expectations and participating in a sport that has a questionable reputation makes their presence in the boxing industry doubly controversial.

METHODOLOGY

I contacted state boxing commissioners, trainers, promoters, matchmakers, and memorabilia collectors to obtain names of current women professional boxers in the United States. Most of these informants agreed to share information, but unfortunately few commissions actually kept official records on female boxers. In talking with matchmakers, state commissioners, managers, and trainers, I learned that finding a sample would be difficult. Most of my contacts were hesitant to disclose names and addresses of women boxers in an effort to insulate the boxers from people suspected of soliciting them for involvement in illegal or "illegitimate" boxing activities (e.g., prostitution, topless "boxing" shows, pornographic magazines or videos). Most contacts requested extensive explanations of my project and intentions. For this reason, and because women's boxing is not yet widely publicized, generating a sample involved building an extensive information snowball that allowed me to piece together information about women in the sport. I restricted the study to boxers who had at least one professional bout within the past 3 years. As a result of these efforts, I conducted interviews with 12 women who identified themselves as professional boxers.

Subjects agreeing to participate in the project were given a questionnaire that served several functions: It provided demographic data, reduced long-distance telephone expenses, provided redundant information for later comparison, supplied background information to explore in the interview, and served as an initial connection between the participants and the research project. It also provided a hint of what to expect in the telephone interview because the mailed questionnaire posed several open-ended questions about the respondent's boxing career. Finally, the open-ended structure of both the questionnaire and interview allowed the boxer's own words to
facilitate a richer, more in-depth understanding of women prizefighters' experiences.

The length of telephone interviews ranged from 25 to 90 minutes. The interview schedule was developed from preliminary discussions with trainers, managers, and promoters who reinforced the need to explore certain boxing issues (e.g., stereotypes and inequality of opportunities). Follow-up interviews were conducted when additional issues arose from conversations with respondents. My own participation at a local boxing gym also sensitized me to many of the issues raised in subsequent interviews. Overall, interviews covered broad aspects of women's careers and experiences in boxing. The guarantee of confidentiality seemed particularly important in my interactions with women boxers because the interviews focused on numerous sensitive issues, such as stereotypes and harassment.

Eighty-seven percent of boxers contacted agreed to participate in this study. By my best calculations, this sample represents approximately 20% of the population of women professional boxers who were competing at that time in the United States. By monitoring news in women's boxing, as well as from self-reports, I also learned that my sample ranged from "well-known" boxers to some who are as yet "undiscovered."

THE BOXERS

The 12 boxers in this study represent 10 different states across the United States. Participants' ages range from 23 to 34 years (X = 28). Most respondents (9) have graduated from or completed some college, whereas others have attended technical school (1) or completed high school (2). These professional boxers identify themselves as White (8), Latina (3), or African American (1), and most are not married (8). The majority of the respondents earn their income outside the boxing ring, but currently four respondents report that they box for a living.

The professional boxing experience of the group varies dramatically (ranging from 1 to 28 bouts), with an average of 7.75 professional bouts fought. Likewise, professional training varies from 1 to 15 years (X = 7). The weight classes of boxers range from Flyweight (weight limit of 112 pounds) to Welterweight (limit of 147 pounds). Many respondents (8) report having high school or college athletic experience, and some (5) currently participate in athletic activities other than boxing, such as martial arts, running, softball, motor-cross racing, and mountain biking.

BUILDING BOXER IDENTITY

INTRODUCTION TO BOXING

Although their overall feelings about boxing are similar, these athletes came into the sport in many different ways. Some boxers were introduced to the sport by friends or their husbands who wanted to help them lose weight, some signed up (or were signed up by friends) to participate in
Toughman contests, others wanted to enhance their skills in the martial arts, some followed their fathers and brothers to the gym as a child, and a couple were inspired to explore opportunities to box after seeing men's boxing on television. The following three stories reflect the diversity of recruitment among women participants:

Some guys from my college were entering in the men's division [of a Toughman contest, and] they needed some women, so they kind of encouraged me to do it. And I did. I was fortunate enough to win. So it just took off from there, really. I entered into three more, and won those. After that I was offered a professional contract.

I think when I saw Sugar Ray Leonard fight Marvin Hagler it really inspired me to actually box, myself. [At first] I [would] copy things I saw, or what I read. And I used to hang up a punch bag in the . . . walk-in closet. And the reason I hung it in there is 'cause I didn't want anybody to know that I was into boxing. . . . I was just being a girl—I was afraid of what people would say. They'd think I was weird or whatever. So that's why I kept putting it off, and eventually I just couldn't resist it anymore; I just had to do it [join a local boxing club].

[A friend] had received an invitation in the mail to go see a women's boxing match . . . and so we went to it. And it was the first boxing match I've ever been to, and I had never heard of women's boxing, so I was really intrigued. . . . You know, I thought to myself, "Oh my god. I've got to learn it. I've got to do it! I want this to be me!"

MOTIVATIONS FOR BOXING PARTICIPATION

Considering the stigma potential of the sport, why would women choose to participate in boxing? These female pugilists feel about boxing as other athletes might feel about their own sports. All respondents describe at least one of the following factors that contribute to their enjoyment of the sport: the intense competition, the adrenaline rush, the thrill of performing in front of a crowd, the love of the sport, the development of skill, psychological strength, or the demanding training needed to prepare for the competition. One boxer reveals the irony of her attraction to the sport:

It's just . . . I just have this desire to do it. You know, different people love different things, and for some reason I was just born with this love for boxing. You know, if I didn't like boxing I'd probably think it was a terrible sport, but I just happened to love it, and love competing in it. I'm not really a fighter by nature—I've never fought outside of the ring or anything. But I have this love for just being in the ring and the skill of it all. And, you know, it's like a physical chess game.

Another boxer describes additional benefits of boxing:

I love it! I love the training. Boxing gives you an inner strength like nothing else, and no one can take that away from you. I'm addicted. Also, it's an adrenaline high—a lot of excitement.
CAREER GOALS

When asked about their career goals, many boxers report goals typical of a professional athlete and included a wide range of responses. For example, many women expressed interest in competing in the Olympic Games (assuming they could be grandfathered into being allowed to compete), and others look forward to winning championship boxing titles. One boxer wants to become a household name—like the famous American heavyweight Mohammed Ali. But some boxers describe more general goals about participating in the sport itself. As one boxer explains, “My goals would be just to . . . be respected by men that are in boxing—as far as managers, trainers, promoters, and boxers. For them to know me as a woman that enjoys boxing.” One boxer, however, claimed to have no goals, because “it’s not a sport that [women] can go real far with . . . at this point.” Also recognizing the current limitations for women in boxing, another respondent still hopes for increasing opportunities:

I’ve never set my goals too high because I’ve never expected too much from the sport, being a woman—you know, moneywise, or success, or famewise. But really I’d love to box on the undercard of a big men’s world title.

In addition, respondents represent a wide participation range across the continuum of career development. Of the 12 respondents, only 2 are planning or are in boxing retirement. The other fighters expect their careers to last between 2 and 10 years (X = 5.45).

EXPERIENCES AS A WOMAN BOXER

Although they identify themselves as professional boxers, and many plan to continue in their pursuit of a career in boxing, all respondents note that their gender remains the focal point of social interactions in the boxing industry. These interactions often involve stereotyping and sex discrimination, which occur both at the gym and at fights.

STEREOTYPES

The social construction of gender involves a careful and elaborate architecture of expectations for women and men, which can result in behavioral dualisms. In this view, women and men exhibit feminine or masculine qualities, not both. Women who challenge traditional conceptions of femininity by participating in boxing (a sport defined as masculine) are subject to negative sanctions. Women boxers are aware that they make such a challenge. Most women boxers perceive that, as a result of this challenge, they are stereotyped by both the general public and by people within the boxing industry. Respondents identified six main stereotypes associated with women who box: (a) extremely overweight or husky, (b) different or strange, (c) manly or butch, (d) lesbian, (e) ugly, and (f) Foxee boxer.10
One of the most common stereotypes is the Foxee boxer, a woman who is a stripper, not a boxer. By assuming women's involvement in Foxee boxing, others delegitimize her status as boxer, almost as if a Foxee boxer is the only socially expected role of women in the ring:

Well, lots of times people compare it to Foxee boxing. It's like mud-wrestling or oil wrestling . . . you know, things like huge pillows on the end of their hands, they've got their bikinis on, and so a lot of people say, "Oh, you do Foxee boxing?"

Another boxer sums up the dualism of women boxers as a sexual object and women boxers who challenge traditional femininity:

There's really two stereotypes. They think they're going to get women that are fighting like Foxee boxing, where they slap. You know how typical girls throw their punches when they've not been taught how to box. And then the other . . . that they're all dykes. That's what they say.

Women who are defined as participating in actual boxing (not Foxee) challenge the social construction of femininity. A challenge to socially established femininity is sometimes mistaken for a rejection of heterosexuality, as if to say, "Women who are real boxers are mannish and thus aren't real women, so they must be gay." The following comment describes this logic of competing characteristics:

You know, you hear it a bunch of time, mostly that they're gay, something like that. You know, they're more mannish characteristics . . . you hear a lot of that. I expect it because in sports [the stereotypes are] common. I wish people would get over the stereotypes.

As with stereotypes plaguing female athletes in other sports, those about women boxers are often misleading. The lesbian label, in fact, seems to be the most popular stereotype of female prizefighters. In fact, women pugilists pose a dichotomy to those who stereotype them as either lesbian (nonheterosexual and not attractive to men) or Foxee boxer (heterosexual and attractive to men). Women athletes often have been sexualized in advertising and media coverage (Messner, Duncan, & Jensen, 1992; Young & White, 1995), discrediting them as athletes by making them appealing to the male gaze. Adrienne Rich (1980) explains that the preoccupation with women's sexuality is a necessary component to the institutionalized practice of "compulsory heterosexuality"—a socially constructed political institution where heterosexuality is strictly controlled and enforced. Heterosexuality is defined as natural, so that women who are not attracted to men are, by definition, deviant (or lesbian). Because women's sexual deviance is also often appropriated for male enjoyment, the image of a Foxee boxer is imposed over that of the woman who boxes on a serious level. In spite of the prominence of these strategies, the interviewed boxers also provide information that contradicts some of the other stereotypes:
[A promoter] told [my trainer] that she would not promote [a show] because they all look like athletes. And she told [my trainer] what made me different was because I don't look like an athlete. And I don't know if that's good or bad [laughter], but anyway she meant it. . . . It was a compliment.

This compliment of femininity will likely accrue more fights for this boxer because she is more marketable in the eyes of promoters who may cater to perceived sexist audiences. Femininity, in the traditional or unidimensional sense of “not manlike,” is favored over a broadening definition that encompasses a range of possibilities for expressing femininity. Because femininity is linked with compulsory heterosexuality, it implies an attractiveness to men. Because masculinity is not thought attractive to heterosexual men, heterosexist logic assumes that women who participate in the masculine sport of boxing must, then, not be feminine. For women boxers, the focus on femininity is a way to dispel stereotypes, and they also recognize that others question “real” women's participation in the sport. As one boxer reasoned,

But I'm feminine, and you know, I think that's why people are so surprised.

The experience of being stereotyped (or belonging to a stereotyped group) is not unusual for other women who participate in activities perceived as masculine, and respondents often identify themselves as being in the same position as other such women. One boxer explains the blanket sexism (and resulting stereotypes) that women in nontraditional activities face:

You're gonna find it everywhere. It doesn't matter what a female does. . . . I guess it comes down to when you're doin' female stuff it's okay. But when you're doin' other stuff . . . women just catch hell, period.

For women boxers, stereotypes and discrimination seem par for the course and can occur both in the atmosphere of the gym or surround an actual boxing event.

**AT THE GYM**

Although some boxers train at home, all have exercised in boxing gyms at some point in their careers. Entrance into boxing gyms is not guaranteed for women. In addition, gaining entrance does not automatically ensure gaining status as a member of the gym, and trainers and gym managers often fail to assist in women's training:

I was the first woman to go to that gym, so I don't know if it was just a macho thing. But nobody did train me. I was there on a daily basis, and you know [they] said, “Well, we just haven't had a chance.” I didn't even know what a jab was [before my first fight]!

Some women boxers who gain the right to work out in gyms soon discover additional obstacles. One boxer recalls how her presence in the gym was eventually defined as problematic:
I was in a gym for a while, but then . . . [my friend's] coach told [him] that I was distracting the guys. You know, he let him know that I shouldn't go in there.

Often, participating in boxing gyms involves negotiating various forms of discrimination, including harassment. Although exile from the local gym may be forced, other boxers choose not to join gyms at all to avoid discrimination or harassment, serving as an effective method of social control. Other boxers use alternative strategies to make gym work beneficial. For example, in an effort to avoid being the object of disconcerting attention from male boxers, one woman began to train in the gym after the male boxers had left:

I felt uncomfortable with them there. Most of them just, when they did come [down to the gym], they'd just stare and watch the whole time, you know. And I couldn't really concentrate. So I liked to work out by myself . . . or with [my trainer].

Of the 11 boxers who have trained in boxing gyms, 8 were the first women in their gyms. However, perceptions of discrimination decrease dramatically when gym rapport already has been established, as in the case of women who enter coed facilities:

There was already quite a few women there when I came there. There's about half women and half men. So I think that's one reason women are a lot more accepted in my gym, and the atmosphere is just a lot different, you know.

In addition, the presence of a trainer can offer a buffer that may negate potential harassment:

I basically been in the gym with the trainer, so they don't say anything to me. Because I have a trainer with me, and a trainer that they knew. And they can't say anything . . . but I can imagine what they would say if I came alone.

Contacts through other supportive boxers also can decrease harassment or help a woman boxer gain legitimate status in the gym. One boxer recalls her initial contact in a local gym:

At first, like I say, I mean the guys didn't talk to me. Or if they did they had some smart remark to say, like, "You're a joke. You have no business here." You know, stuff like that. And my brothers did pretty good about supportin' me. . . . But when you've got other guys in there that are tellin' you stuff like that you get intimidated, and kinda like, "Well, do I really belong here?" But I never . . . I never had thoughts of quittin'. I thought, "No, I'm not gonna let these guys do this to me."

Overall, women boxers report that status increases most when they have proven themselves as legitimate pugilists. As one boxer explains,

At first I was very intimidated by them. . . . But, you know, once they see what I can do they just accept me like anybody else and treat me respectfully and seriously.
Even with issues of discrimination in the gym or in the ring (discussed later), women boxers emphasize that some men greatly support their efforts. Male supporters are invaluable because they either hold powerful positions in boxing or are able to make connections with other men who also may be supportive or sympathetic. Beyond these structural connections, women boxers recognize the valuable emotional, physical (as in the case of training), or monetary support (from promoters or managers) that men provide. One woman points out that although some men may not offer help to women pugilists, men have played an active role in her development:

Like I say, the people that have worked with me and have taught me is males. You know, have taken the time to teach me right are the males, you know.

Another boxer illuminates the diverse attitude among male trainers:

But then I ran across a few guys that really helped me train and really wanted me to go far with it. There's just a couple that just didn't like it—the fact being a girl, you know.

Female pugilists also share the gym with male boxers, whose negative opinions about women boxers' ability or legitimacy in the gym become most apparent when men and women are in direct contact in the boxing gym (talking or working out with each other). This seems to be amplified when sparring. Many of the women boxers train in all-male gyms where women boxers are either not available to spar or are not of the same caliber as the professional women. For these reasons they spar with male boxers (amateurs or professionals). Sparring simulates fight situations, providing an opportunity for boxers to develop skills against live opponents (rather than a heavy bag) and improve conditioning. In this controlled exercise (protective headgear is worn with the objective to work with a partner, not knock him or her out), boxers are matched in skill. However, in coed sparring, women directly confront male boxers, which often leads to a strain on already problematic gender relations. One boxer describes how the exercise of sparring often can amplify potential negative attitudes about women in the ring:

You know, whenever two guys that go in the ring, of course they mess around with each other. You know, and kind of respect each other. Of course you go in there to fight, right, but the guys aren't gonna go in there to kill each other. But whenever they got in there to fight with me, their intentions was to get me out of there. So I got some beatings. I've had my share of beatings from the guys. But I taught them that they weren't gonna get me out of there.

Another boxer underscores this issue of serious (and potentially dangerous) harassment, which she encounters continuously:

But when you spar with these guys, you can kind of feel that you're not really wanted there. You can feel their punches. Especially if you hit them, oh boy, they're going to come back at you. . . . They lose total control. I mean, they just
... their male ego gets hurt, I guess. "There's no way this woman's gonna hit me." Many a times they come at me, and I give it to them, too.

A similar tension may manifest itself when the female pugilist acts as boxing instructor to male boxers. Usually, experienced boxers (whether male or female) are eager and are encouraged by trainers to teach proper skills to novice boxers. Some women boxers report that some men do not welcome this attention. One boxer, who has been training for more than 3 years, explains:

A guy came in and no one else was in the gym [no other coaches] so I tried to show him just how to jab, and just relax, and his proper stance. Well, he didn't listen. He was like, "Don't talk to me! You're a woman!" So [the trainer] came in, and I told him what happened. He said to the guy, "Well, why don't you spar a couple of rounds with her." Well, I was fortunate enough. . . . It was hard sparring, but I did come out a little bit on top . . . but I gained his respect.

In time, many of the boxers in this study found that some managers, trainers, or male boxers began to defend them in situations that invited confrontation with other male boxers. Although this could be viewed as a form of chivalry or paternalism, the support of male trainers and boxers confirms for many women pugilists the strides women are making in changing attitudes among some in the boxing industry. Acceptance of women boxers by those in the industry is often based on respect. Once respect has been established, male supporters may legitimize a woman boxer's status. However, gaining respect from male boxers, trainers, and managers often evolves over a long period of time, after a woman has adequately proven herself as a serious boxer. This change in attitude is often dependent on the proof of ability rather than an ideological decision. A woman may prove herself serious by proving tenacity, eagerness to learn and work hard, or boxing ability. One boxer explains a familiar exercise:

And now it's like if someone comes into our gym, and they say something negative, [my trainer] just loses it. The first thing immediately he has me do is work hand-pads. Because it's a way of showing them, "Look what she can do." Then that's the way we gain their respect.

Her trainer's support, however, also developed over time. When she first entered the gym, he tried to discourage her from pursuing boxing altogether:

At the beginning, when I met [the trainer], he didn't want me in the gym. He was going to have me knocked out by one of his men fighters . . . to discourage me from boxing. And thank goodness that [the trainer] had a friend there with him. . . . [The friend] tried to tell him, "Oh, don't be so hard on her. Give her a chance." And so [the friend] kind of talked [the trainer] into giving me a chance. . . . [The trainer] didn't have me knocked out, or anything.

Adequate preparedness necessitates establishing a beneficial atmosphere in which to train. Although women prizefighters spend the majority of their
boxing careers in training, they do so with the goal of boxing professionally on fight cards, where discrimination also plagues their experience.

AT THE FIGHT

Many women boxers experience sexual harassment or discrimination in, or surrounding, competition. Subtle and covert discrimination comes from a variety of sources before, during, or after the match. One boxer recounts a gruesome incident that occurred just before a recent fight:

At the last minute . . . they switched [the gloves]. They said, "No, you girls are going to have to fight in 16 ounce."13 Nobody was sure about the rules and regulations. It was just total chaos. . . . Hours before that fight they took us into this back room . . . and [the doctor] had to draw blood to make sure that we weren't pregnant. Not only that, they did a Pap smear and a rectal examination. . . . Both of us were really upset. It's like they didn't know . . . I mean they were trying to find a way to stop this fight, or it seemed like to me. . . . Knowing we had already gone through all of those tests, you know . . . and so there was this little dirty room—I guess storage. . . . Yeah, it was horrible.

Although such extreme experiences were not typically reported by women boxers in this study, women prizefighters did overwhelmingly report that negative comments are commonplace. Although femininity and masculinity are socially constructed, they are often mistaken for innate qualities. As a result, women who challenge traditional conceptions of femininity may find that their actual identity as a female is questioned by onlookers:

There was a comment at my last fight . . . "Are you sure that's a girl?" You know, 'cause they couldn't believe how hard I hit. It didn't make me mad, it just . . . insulted me. I mean, it made you kinda want to say, "Do you want me to show you?" They just can't accept that there's a female out there that can do [it].

Sexual harassment, in the form of sexual suggestiveness, also may take place in the context of a bout. Memories of sexual insult during a fight are still fresh in the mind of one boxer, who recalls that

[a boxer] made a remark while I was in my corner—"Hey, after your fight, why don't we go out and celebrate and give me something I deserve." And that just blew me out of the water, I really wanted to knock the living lights out of him. But I thought "No." This is another thing that I have learned is to control yourself, you know. But, you know, there's just one thing that I would like to have—for the male to respect the female—just because we respect them.

In spite of the sex discrimination experienced in other aspects of their careers, all boxers reported predominantly positive responses from boxing crowds. Many boxers receive standing ovations after their fights and are asked to sign autographs or pose for photographs and are congratulated by fans on their way back to the dressing room. The following comments are indicative:
Every fight that I had here in [name of town] we got a standing ovation. And the one that I had in [name of town] we got a standing ovation, when none of the other men’s fights did.

Well, there was a lot of men that after the fight that came up to me. Oh, a lot of them. They were, “Wow, that was great! You should have won!” Some of them got my autograph... and they bought me beer.

One fight in [name of town]... I couldn’t get out of the ring. The people rushed to the steps, they were just all over me. Finally, I got down the steps, and then before the main event could come out, the commissioner had to come out and ask [my trainer] to get me into the dressing room so they could bring the main event out.

Boxers speculate that women’s bouts are popular because most people in attendance are surprised at the active style that many women boxers bring to a fight—this view is held by boxing spectators and commentators as well. Boxing fans celebrate “heart” as part of the romance of boxing (Early, 1994; Oates, 1987)—when two boxers appear to be giving it their all, boxing fans often respond with a resounding celebration of desire, courage, and fightability. Although the popularity of women boxers has not been studied, positive reception could be due, in part, to the fact that their heart is highlighted. In other words, because fans rarely see women athletes in this position, a display of heart may pleasantly surprise fans and dispel some stereotypes. Although there are certainly a number of people who watch women box out of curiosity, it is not, as yet, being marketed as freak entertainment.14

Despite fan support, a boxer’s career depends exclusively on a promoter’s ability to schedule fights that pay well enough to allow her to continue boxing. Unfortunately, many promoters have been reluctant to put women on their fight cards. This is extremely frustrating for women aspiring to box professionally, especially because promoters’ main concerns seem to stem from their ignorance about women in the sport, as in the case of the woman boxer who was told by a promoter, “Go out and research women’s boxing and get back to me.” The dependence that fighters have on promoters is perceived, by boxers, as power over their lives. The relationship between a woman boxer and her promoter also may be sexualized, as this boxer explains:

I’ve been through a couple of promoters, and some of them treat you with respect, some treat you like you owe them something afterwards. Cause they’re giving you... like they’re giving you opportunities. It’s like they’re bending over backwards, so they expect something in return.

Some promoters experience a certain amount of conflict between their personal beliefs and their goal of profit when they work with women boxers. Although many are perceived as being sexist (not wanting to put women on their fight cards based on their personal preferences), a promoter’s goal, after all, is profit, which depends on the size of the crowd (or television
audience). One boxer recognizes this promoter's dilemma, in which the goal of profit usually wins out:

You know, they're going to put women on cards if it's going to draw crowds. So I think that that will overrule what these guys think. But it's a touchy area. Like [my trainer], he hasn't wanted to be too forceful with the woman's thing, even though he really wants it. He kinda has to play the game. You know, he's kinda having to tiptoe around it. But he's been real successful, so far, in getting women fights.

Although male supporters can strengthen the legitimacy of women boxers, the issue of stereotypes is especially important to women professional boxers. A negative label can cause a woman boxer to be less marketable in the eyes of promoters. The following boxer provides this rationale for her "marketing advantage" in the boxing industry:

What makes it work [for me] is that I'm 100% woman. I notice when I go to like the weigh-in, I notice how I'm treated by the men, and how my opponents are treated by the men. It's different. I always dress very nice—of course, makeup, and my hair's done, and everything.

The concept 100% woman has heterosexist implications because "real" women highlight femininity in traditional ways, such as socially approved dress, recognizable use of makeup, and "appropriate" hairstyles. This boxer speculates that stereotypical women are actually hurting themselves by not catering to expected standards of femininity. This connection between perceived femininity and marketability is widely recognized by women prizefighters. Women who desire to make their living by boxing professionally report a number of concerns.

SURVIVING AS A BOXER

All boxers in the sample recognized a series of issues that could affect the future of women's boxing and, subsequently, their own futures in the sport. These issues were enumerated as boxers discussed their perceptions of positive and negative factors affecting women's boxing.

PERCEPTIONS OF WHAT IS HURTING WOMEN'S BOXING

Whereas sexism (by fans, promoters, and boxers) provides the foundation for lack of support by some fans and promoters or managers, none of the boxers explicitly recognized sexism as a structural constraint. However, boxers who mentioned promoters' lack of interest and difficulties with sexual harassment attributed these things to women's participation in a masculine sport and masculine arena (as mentioned earlier). Specific explanations of why women's boxing has not yet become popular were offered by most respondents. In general, the boxers identified two aspects of the same problem (promotion) that are hurting the sport: lack of publicity for fan
support and lack of promoter interest. Some respondents are frustrated with people’s ignorance of women boxers:

There just haven’t been enough [opportunities to showcase women’s skills] for people to appreciate it, you know. I mean, if you ask most people about women’s boxing, they’ve never even seen it. So, you know, you can’t expect people wanna watch women’s boxing if they don’t expect it to be much good.

However, one boxer emphasizes the boxer’s responsibility for poor promoter interest. Expanding on her earlier victim-blame approach, this boxer emphasizes the importance of showcasing feminine characteristics for the good of all boxers. When explaining what was hurting women’s boxing the most, she offers,

Women who come into gyms, who come into fights... and they want to act like a man. They want to look like a man. They don’t want to promote. ... If I’m going to promote women’s boxing, I have to promote a woman that looks like a woman. I can’t promote women’s boxing and put a woman that looks like [a man]. We have to get the women out of it that think they are men, or that want to be a man, or feel like they can compete with the men.

Although this boxer recognizes the sexism that persists in the boxing industry, which only makes marketable the women who conform to conventional standards of femininity, her own sexist and heterosexist concerns indicate an internalized belief that this is appropriate or tolerable. Her assumption that women she considers unfeminine (or mannish) desire to look, act, or be men also has heterosexist connotations, a form of social control regulating women in the boxing industry.

PERCEPTIONS OF WHAT IS HELPING WOMEN’S BOXING

The support of men in boxing management is the foremost issue for women boxers. Promotion is the key to any boxer’s success. For this reason, women pugilists are cognizant of any advances made in the sport as a result of successful promotion, including the support of big-name promoters who will likely bring with them opportunities for increased media coverage:

Promoters such as Bob Arum has a girl; Don King getting involved. There’s going to be women’s boxing exposed on TV. That’s helping women’s boxing more than anything could, because now we’re getting involved with the top promoters in the game.

Because professional boxing is dominated by men, some women suggest that having visible and outspoken men in their camp is a big help in promoting their own cause as a boxer. It is believed that these men can convince other men to promote women fighters and thus increase women’s chances at gaining opportunities to fight. Although sexism was never explicitly mentioned, many boxers recognized the need to reduce sexist attitudes, which
could be accomplished through educating people not exposed to good women boxers. One boxer reveals the key to her success:

To me, what is helping [me] is that I’ve got all males [for trainers, coaches, corner men]. . . . They get out there, and they talk for me. They say, “Hey, you know, I mean women have the right, too.” So if he can get a little push in there from a male, and to do a little talking for you, you’re gonna make it. . . . When you’ve got a male there to help and to put his foot in [the door] and talk for you, you know, it’s gonna help.

The fact that so many women boxers believe only men are able to help them gain strides in the sport is also supported by the fear that women’s participation will feminize the sport. One boxer explained that she originally thought a well-known woman manager also might be interested in managing her; however, she soon learned that the female manager was not interested in promoting women’s boxing because she had to guard against the belief that she, too, might actually “feminize” boxing. Although women might be advocates of women’s participation in the ring, there is a preoccupation with the threat of being ostracized or labeled as a woman who is trying to feminize the sport (and more concerned with women’s rights than the sport itself). In part due to this fear, current women boxers have not taken the charge to publicize women’s boxing and instead stay focused on promoting their own careers in the sport.

The recent popularity of executive boxing and Boxercise also has been identified as a positive way to develop people’s interest in boxing, in general, and women’s boxing, in particular. These variations on boxing are healthy alternatives to amateur or professional boxing and attract a wide range of participants. The possibilities, according to some women boxers, are endless:

Executive boxing—that will make women, children, and men work together in the gym, naturally. I mean, they’re learning the basic technique of boxing. . . . They learn the steps. And more and more people I think will be more interested in boxing, because, “Oh, we’re doing that in the gym. Oh, there’s boxing on TV! I want to see boxing!”

In addition, another boxer believes that some women, after learning the basics about boxing, may eventually seek competition:

I think a lot of it especially started out with, you know, a lot of the actresses and everything doing the boxing. And that can be good and bad, because it can kind of promote sort of that sex symbol image . . . like women not really boxing, they’re just doing the exercise, or whatever. [But it’s good because] it has helped a lot more women get interested in doing the conditioning, and then they want to start trying it. . . . They want to start trying out all the skills and everything that you’ve been practicing.

The need for additional women boxers in the industry is paramount. Without competition, current female prizefighters’ careers are severely limited.
The recent opportunity for women to box as amateurs is cited as another way to promote the sport and ensure its survival:

Well, it's gonna allow a lot more women to participate in the sport. And it's gonna take a few years for those women, you know, to grow up in the boxing, and compete in this, and then turn professional. But I would hope it would bring an influx of new professionals to the game in a few years.

Since USA Boxing opened its doors to women amateurs in 1993, registration of women boxers has grown in record numbers. Although amateur boxing is a stepping-stone for most male professional boxers, it is not yet known how many women amateurs might eventually turn professional. Regardless of recruitment issues, as women prizefighters anticipate their own future in the sport, one issue remains central to their success: impression management.

IDENTITY MANAGEMENT

Most women pugilists believe that stereotypes and discrimination result from sexist attitudes toward women. Thus women prizefighters "blast" (Duff & Hong, 1989) people who hold conventional and limiting conceptions of femininity. However, this technique of neutralization does not immediately serve women professional boxers because they must market themselves amid a sexist society, regardless of whether it is changing. Because stereotyping brings such severe consequences to the careers of women boxers, many manage their public appearance and behavior in an effort to escape stigmatization. Identity management among women prizefighters includes several strategies: wear feminine uniforms; hide lesbianism and bisexuality; do not associate with stereotyped people; and emphasize feminine characteristics of appearance such as long hair, makeup, and feminine clothing in public appearances outside the ring. The use of feminine uniforms, however, is the most popular form of impression management among women prizefighters. Feminine uniforms are distinguished as such through the use of specific colors or decorations. Two boxers describe their uniforms and goals:

Well, pink is, of course, a feminine color—so that's a statement in itself.

Yeah, [I wear] a fringe skirt [behind my trunks], so I can look a little more feminine... I mean, we are girls, so why not? I mean, I want to do something that looks feminine. It's nothing like sexy, it's just feminine.

A statement of femininity, though, may simultaneously sexualize a woman boxer's appearance, as shown in the following example:

I don't feel like I look like the regular stereotype of... a husky woman, low voice, short hair, just act like a man. And I try to get away from that, as far as I can, because I don't want to be stereotyped that way. I wore like my boxer
shorts, and I wore 'em kinda small, and I wore a sport bra with it: a white one. And I'd tan, like bodybuilders do . . . just try to look decent out there.

Sexualizing the appearance of women athletes is a common practice in U.S. society. However, in the case of women prizefighters, sexualizing appearance to gain or maintain marketability is tricky because there is a fine line between ensuring perceived femininity and becoming synonymous with the Foxee boxer image—an image that could destroy a woman pugilist's career. Sexualizing images, then, can be dangerous. Most boxers in this study focus on the perceived dichotomy of masculine versus feminine appearance and enhance “natural” feminine qualities rather than attempting a radically feminine appearance. One boxer explains her own strategy in relation to another boxer with whom she had just competed. By juxtaposing their identities, she develops distance from the stereotyped boxer and from the stereotypes, in general:

I couldn't imagine myself walking up to someone like [another boxer] and saying, “You need to let your hair grow. You need to put some makeup on. You need to stop walking around with that baseball hat on. Just walk like a woman, not like a guy.”

In her rejection of such a caricature, this boxer believes that she validates her own femininity, and she emphasizes the importance of appearance and behavior defined as feminine. Her practice of aggressively blasting “unfeminine” women boxers dissociates her from the stereotype of the masculine woman boxer, which will not hamper her marketability, if not improve it. This technique of impression management, however, was not common among other women boxers.

The stereotype of women boxers as a Foxee boxer also is combated by emphasizing the ability to box. Although none of the boxers identified this as specifically masculine, all recognized the necessity of proving fightability. This ability to prove oneself as capable of participating in a sport defined as violent, however, may indicate to others the ability to use masculine traits (such as aggression) when necessary. Some women prizefighters feel that when they appear “too feminine,” their legitimacy as a boxer may be called into question. One boxer, who claims that she has developed a feminine public image, explains how she has found a successful balance:

And I can back myself up, because I can fight. It's not like I go out there and say, “Oh, well I'm a fighter” and try to get all this publicity. I can back up everything I say.

In addition, as discussed earlier, the presence of men (whether relatives or trainers) also serves as a buffer by providing male entrance into the boxing industry. Women who report being surrounded by men also perceive experiencing less stigmatization than other women boxers. Although this strategy of public identity management is not identified as purposeful, it greatly aids the woman boxer. It is not clear, however, why this is the case.
As mentioned earlier, men may attempt to legitimate women in the sport by attempting to convince other men. However, mere association with men at fights or in gyms seems to provide a buffer to sexist comments or direct confrontation. This phenomenon may be attributed to a fear of men’s reaction, compulsory heterosexuality, or the conception that a woman boxer does not require public sanctioning because she is associated with a man.

Not all boxers purposefully incorporated identity management strategies; however, no boxers reported specific forms of resistance to gender-related norms. Women’s boxing is, by all standards, in its infancy, so women boxers who (at this point) actively pursue this form of resistance would likely be alienated (either not get fights or be purposefully avoided). In this way, boxing subculture keeps women boxers who might challenge existing structural constraints “in check.” The boxing structure, then, serves the status quo and narrow definitions of masculinity and femininity.

**DISCUSSION**

In the absence of a literature on women professional boxers, this research, in part, grew out of what is known about men’s professional boxing and women’s experiences in organized athletics. The present study indicates that women professional boxers share characteristics with both groups. Like male professional boxers, female prizefighters must deal with issues of exploitation. But, as the present study indicates, women boxers have much more in common with other female athletes: They are stereotyped for participating in an activity perceived as deviant for women, they experience discrimination (including harassment), and they use impression management strategies to shield their marketability as boxers.

**SIMILARITIES WITH MALE BOXERS**

Unlike the men in Weinberg and Arond’s (1952) study, the women in this study came from diverse backgrounds and were introduced to boxing in myriad ways. Although the demographic profile of successful men in professional boxing tends to mirror the transformations in ethnic composition of the urban lower strata, where male boxers are traditionally courted from the urban streets into the gym (Hare, 1971; Sugden, 1987; Wacquant, 1992; Weinberg & Arond, 1952), none of these women pugilists described similar recruitment experiences. However, it is difficult to verify whether the ethnic background of women in boxing overall has paralleled the pattern in men’s boxing because so little is known about the history of women’s participation.

Like male professional boxers, female professional pugilists are surrounded by people who have a vested interest in their careers. Because promoters, managers, and trainers are driven by profit, women potentially face the same fundamentally exploitative relationships that male boxers face. These exploitative relationships seem to involve primarily the promoter, who benefits most from any boxer’s career. Although women’s success in a boxing career depends on the promoter’s ability to provide opportunities...
to fight, a dilemma occurs. Typically, before a promoter will agree to promote women's boxing, he \(^{16}\) wants to be sure that women's boxing will make money (i.e., the promoter must be convinced that the sport will be popular). However, for women's boxing to become popular, it must be promoted: People must have an opportunity to watch (and possibly enjoy) women's boxing (see Figure 2). This care over an investment is not particularly unusual for any promoter, but the boxing promoter's role is complicated by the sexism that flourishes in the boxing industry. Not only must a promoter consider his own beliefs about women entering the sport but also anticipate his audience's reaction.

Women boxers' relationships with promoters often are plagued with sexual discrimination. Many pugilists perceive that promoters are tentative about promoting women's fights because they personally do not support women as boxers. Ironically, however, these boxers believe that promoters' greed will result in their promotion of women's boxing because promoters are most interested in drawing a paying crowd, no matter how it is done. Because audience response seems to, at this time, be favorable, albeit not overly enthusiastic, women boxers maintain an optimistic attitude that their participation in the sport soon will be regarded as desirable. Many hope that a showcase of outstanding boxing skill will outweigh opinions that women in the sport are deviant.

In contrast to their relationships with promoters, these women spoke highly of their managers and trainers and never mentioned exploitative relationships with them. \(^{17}\) The women I talked to seem to have fundamentally different relationships with their trainers, perhaps based on their experience as women, than did the male fighters in Weinburg and Arond's (1952) study. Most of the boxers in this study also reported different personal relationships with managers or trainers—three of the boxers are married to (and one is engaged to) their managers or trainers, and some women are trained by supportive brothers or fathers. Regardless of the nature of this
relationship, women prizefighters identify their association with men as crucial to success in the sport.

Like male pugilists, women’s marketability determines their success. As a commodity, women boxers, specifically, must be concerned with their appearance and especially with the stereotypes currently associated with women’s boxing. Negative public opinion of women pugilists can significantly damage their careers. Issues of stereotyping, discrimination, and concern for identity management make the woman professional boxer similar to other women athletes. However, their concern with identity management is primarily motivated by a need to be promotable. In this way, they share something in common with other successful women athletes (professional athletes or Olympians) who actively pursue endorsements.

SIMILARITIES WITH WOMEN ATHLETES

The most obvious similarity that women boxers have with other women athletes is their shared history of discrimination in sport. Professional women boxers are subject to sex discrimination in training as well as at the boxing show. Discrimination in the gym may take the form of not being allowed to work out in a particular boxing gym, as well as being harassed by male boxers or trainers. In the ring, women are not allowed the same opportunities to fight as men, and they may experience sexual harassment from promoters, male boxers, and fans. This discrimination, in part, stems from stereotypes about women who participate in boxing.

Many of the boxers suggested that they are stereotyped because they are participating in boxing—a sport perceived as a masculine preserve. As one boxer rationalized, “It’s such a rough sport,” almost as if she is not surprised that stereotypes are a consequence of participation in boxing. This study provides evidence that some women prizefighters internalize societal stereotypes. Some women boxers identify stereotyped participants and then reject their appearance and behaviors in part because of the perceived impact it has on the sport (the idea that some women confirm stereotypes that result in less promotion). Other boxers accept the stereotypes associated with women boxers, then actively adopt strategies to manipulate their outward appearance or behavior to avoid further labeling. Although women pugilists in this study do not exhibit all the strategies identified by Blinde and Taub (1992b) and Dessertrain and Weiss (1988), they do use many, including wearing feminine uniforms, not disclosing their lesbian or bisexual identity, not associating with stereotyped people, and emphasizing feminine characteristics of appearance (e.g., long hair, makeup, and feminine street clothing).

Women professional boxers manage their public identities to avoid or remove undesired effects of labels that can significantly damage their careers. Ironically, although most women boxers feel the need to emphasize femininity (which often implies sexual expression) to combat labels of being masculine, they also recognize the need to distance themselves from the
image of the Foxee Boxer—a woman who is a sex symbol, not a boxer (see Figure 3). This results in the need for a careful balance between being perceived as too feminine or too masculine, either of which has negative consequences on a woman boxer’s career. This Catch-22 involves constant reflexive thinking about one’s gender identity. However, in the case of professional boxing, some boxers reproduce patriarchal relations by using strategies that will serve to further their boxing careers. By emphasizing traditional images of femininity, athletes unwittingly maintain a dynamic that, in effect, supports women’s subordinate status.

CONCLUSIONS

Because boxing may be perceived as the most masculine of all sports (Csizma et al., 1988), women professional boxers are considered radically gender deviant. They face discrimination and stereotyping, often using strategies for identity management, all because women’s entrance into the masculine preserve of professional boxing is a threat to what sport has traditionally represented to men: men’s “natural” superiority (Messner & Sabo, 1990; Sage, 1990). Women’s participation in boxing represents a triple threat to traditional gender expectations, athletics, and boxing.

First, women boxers threaten conventional gender norms by extending the bounds of and redefining femininity to include qualities highlighted in boxing. Women prizefighters fundamentally reject a unidimensional and dichotomized conceptualization of the social construction of femininity by challenging the most basic beliefs about women, as well as their role in society. Second, women in boxing threaten the traditionally masculine institution of organized sport. Although this may be said of most women who compete in athletics, women boxers represent those female athletes who will participate in any sport, no matter how “masculine,” proving that nothing remains off-limits to women. Finally, women professional boxers threaten the sport industry of boxing. Some boxing purists believe women’s entrance into boxing will “feminize” an essentially masculine sport. If boxing is one of the last of the exclusively male bastions, then women’s entrance as prizefighters represents the end to that enjoyed exclusivity (and the power that goes along with it). This triple threat results in a label of deviant for women prizefighters. Negative sanctions for their inappropriate behavior take the form of discrimination, stereotypes, and labeling. As women pugilists challenge dominant assumptions about women’s gender roles, they face
the possibility of jeopardizing their careers. As this exploration indicates, for women professional boxers the challenge of making a career in the sexually hostile environment of boxing is complicated; success necessitates the employment of a number of identity management strategies to combat the attack of potentially damaging labels. Although these identity management strategies may have little, if anything, to do with a woman’s ability as a boxer, they are often pivotal in providing access to a venue in which to display that ability.

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NOTES

1. In October 1993, USA Boxing (the sanctioning body for amateur boxing competition in the United States) made provisions for women to box as amateurs. Many people believe that this opportunity for women and girls will result in more widespread acceptance and popularity of women’s boxing, as well as serving to attract more women into professional boxing.

2. Professional and amateur boxers differ in two fundamental ways: First, professional boxers are permitted to accept prizes (such as money) for their fights, and second, amateur boxing contains somewhat different scoring and rules, including the use of protective headgear.

3. The “great white hope” is a by-product of crowd pleasing because it is believed that predominantly White American crowds prefer to see White men win fights.

4. Because many boxing champions are of color, racism drives a demand for (and support of, by Whites) Caucasian boxers. Oates (1987) explains that there is a fear among Whites that a Black champion will prove Black men are more “manly” than White men.

5. Matchmakers make “matches” between boxers based on their size, weight, and level of experience. They typically keep in contact with a large number of potential pugilists and their managers.

6. This protection has proven necessary because any affiliation with such businesses or activities can ruin a woman’s professional boxing career. The ability to protect their private life and public reputation may have declined in recent years due to the surge in popularity of women's boxing. However, well-established professional boxers are less likely to be contacted by such people or organizations.

7. Because the identity of many boxers is well protected by people around them, the demographics of the population of women pugilists in the United States cannot be known. However, because there are so few female participants, and the snowball sample was generated from a wide range of sources (commission offices, promoters, trainers, and other boxers), a representative sample might be serendipitous; this, however, was not my aim.

8. Lighter weights seem to be disproportionately represented in women’s professional boxing. Because of the disproportionate number of women competing
in the lighter weights, the newly formed Women’s International Boxing Federation has created new weight divisions for women’s bouts that it sanctions.

9. These are single-elimination tournament-style boxing contests for novice fighters in which the prize money is winner-take-all. The most common of these are “Toughman” or “Mean Mountaineer” contests.

10. Foxee boxing is bikini, topless, or nude “boxing” performed in adult entertainment nightclubs.

11. Although it is often assumed that women boxers are associated with Foxee boxing, none reported ever having participated in such events. However, several of the boxers did report being propositioned to participate. This finding verifies that the confidentiality and protection that some managers, trainers, and matchmakers provide may help women avoid contact with people interested in “illegitimate” activities.

12. Because women professional boxers are usually less skilled than their male counterparts, and men are generally believed to be stronger pound for pound than women, male fighters (particularly professionals) may hold back a little when sparring with women. Although this is almost always the case when women enter as novices, one woman stressed that women could eventually gain the skills necessary to be a strong fighter or sparring partner. She added, “This one guy that I always would spar with told me, ‘You know, I can’t give you anything anymore, because you’ll hurt me.’”

13. Most professional fights use 10- or 12-ounce gloves. Sixteen-ounce gloves are not preferred by boxers because they are heavy and large and thus somewhat awkward. In this particular case, the people in charge of the fight wanted the women to use 16-ounce gloves to lessen the chance that either boxer would get hurt.

14. Some fans of women’s boxing may even be interested in a form of catfighting, as is seen in domination or submission wrestling pornography (associated with the Foxee boxing industry).

15. Executive boxing became popular in the mid-1980s, when businessmen in large cities began to enter boxing gyms for a safe and unique way to work out their frustrations. Now women are beginning to participate in executive boxing, also known as white-collar boxing. Boxercise is the latest aerobics craze in which boxing moves are combined with aerobics for a cardiovascular workout.

16. Even though there are women promoters in professional boxing, none of the boxers in this study reported having worked with female promoters.

17. Although most women boxers have developed close ties to their managers or trainers and trust that they have their best interests in mind, it is difficult to verify whether exploitative relationships exist, though the potential does. Because many women boxers are trained or managed by husbands or boyfriends or relatives, the assumption is that such men certainly would not exploit their boxers.

18. One boxer, who currently considers herself successful, reported that her credibility suffered dramatically for the short time that she was associated (falsely) with Foxee-type boxing.

REFERENCES


