

sexism in sport

there is still a long way to go before women receive the same opportunities and support as men

report: Cathy Brown



It is a well-known fact that women in professional sports have never been fully supported, either financially or psychologically, by the correct backers. Women have strived to get themselves recognised and respected by governing bodies, media and the public, but sexism in sport is still a huge issue.

I will use my sport as an example. Having had first hand experience of such prejudice, I took up boxing professionally about six years ago, and I'm not complaining about the uphill struggle – it has made me more determined to succeed and to prove myself worthy of respect. It has only been in the last six years that women have been able to obtain a professional boxing licence and I considered this to be a light shining at the end of the tunnel. I thought that being awarded a licence was a sign that women were being accepted into the sport – how wrong I was! Apparently skill, determination and dedication were not enough – I had to get on a public show to prove myself.

Even after six years, UK boxing promoters are still not convinced that spectators and TV viewers will be interested in watching two women fight and, most importantly for them, make them enough money. Subsequently they won't give women a chance to appear on their shows, leaving women with no stage to show their skill. I am only referring to the UK scene here – Europe and the US have been brave enough to test the waters and it is proving to be successful. This has encouraged more women to participate, but they are still far from the pay level of men in the same position. Unfortunately in the UK we still have the British TV companies and promoters to conquer, as nobody is brave enough to stick their neck out.

Laila Ali (Mohammed Ali's daughter) has made great progress and is earning huge amounts from fighting and sponsorship – the TV companies love her. Why? Because she has the correct name. I don't deny that she is a great technician and I don't want to criticise her as I respect her as a boxer. I just wonder why the media and promoters have become so contradictory? There are many talented female boxers all over the world who do not receive the recognition that Laila Ali does. I have been trying to encourage more women to turn professional, but there is such a lack of support that they are forced into 'White Collar' or 'unlicensed' boxing, where there is no strict medical supervision and the risk of unnecessary injury, which in turn discourages women from turning professional. And this lack of support doesn't just apply to boxing, it is a problem for all female sportswomen.

It is virtually impossible to achieve decent sponsorship for women in sport because, understandably, sponsors want value for their

money, and only 5% of media coverage is dedicated to women's sport. However, there are a few women who are highly paid, but this raises another issue: whilst male athletes are respected for their sporting abilities, female athletes face a certain pressure to be 'sexy.'

Women are pressurised into doing sexy media shots and dressing in a way that will encourage media attention and make them more appealing to the male eye (men constitute the majority of sporting audiences). We cannot get media coverage simply because we are brilliant at our sport. The advice given to female footballers recently was to wear tighter shorts! Female tennis players are expected to wear short skirts for those spectators lucky enough to catch a glimpse of underwear. On the theme of tennis, Anna Kournikova, who in all honesty was not great at her sport, managed to get sponsorship. Why? Because she is beautiful, sexy and prepared to show half-naked images of herself. Meanwhile, other brilliant players are not receiving the recognition they deserve because they are not as aesthetically pleasing, or have, quite rightly, decided not to become a media whore. Sex sells and unfortunately, this also applies to women's sport. I admit that, in my time, I have become caught up in the 'sex sells' trap and provided the media with sexy shots, purely to try and attract media interest and enable me to show my skill. *The News of the World* have a weekly feature called the 'Sin Bin,' which shows half-naked sportswomen – what message is this giving out?

I don't want to appear completely negative – women have achieved so much in sports over the years, but being recognised for their talent it is an uphill struggle all the way. I love both female and male sports and I respect anyone who is prepared to give 100% dedication, displaying the mental determination necessary to be the best. It is a sad fact that racism, sexism and many other forms of segregation have been prevalent in sport for many years but I hope the situation will improve over time.

All I want is to be given the opportunity to compete at my sport whilst receiving as much support as male boxers, and to be respected as one of the best female boxers in the world for my skill, dedication and determination to win. That's not much to ask is it? [Fn](#)

Cathy Brown has boxed professionally for the past six years and is the current European Flyweight Boxing Champion. Cathy has a diploma in Sports Therapy, a YMCA Gym Instructor qualification and is the winner of a range of Sports Injury awards. She also teaches kickboxing to women, young girls with special needs and mixed-sex boxing classes. She has a number of celebrity clients including Sara Cox and Alexander McQueen. Cathy has a World Title fight scheduled for late 2004.