

Strong Girls, Quick Women - Women's boxing is gaining ground



Women's boxing is catching on thanks to Regina Halmich and films like *Million Dollar Baby*. The boom has been accompanied by the increasingly frequent realisation that boxing offers a very balanced and efficient form of training and in particular helps women to gain in self-confidence. The result is that today boxing clubs are witnessing huge increases in membership. We report from Europe's only women's boxing club.

"Boxcamp" in Berlin Kreuzberg, Monday evening: six girls stand in a circle in the gym hall with skipping ropes in their hands. Music with a fast beat blares from a ghetto blaster. "Get ready", the trainer Sarah calls. Then she presses her stopwatch and shouts "and go!" The girls skip; on Sarah's command they increase or reduce their tempo. The first girls start sweating, but nobody grumbles. Sandbags in various sizes and forms dangle over their heads. Half of the hall is taken up by a boxing ring with white ropes. A banner with "Box Club Viktoria 1971 Berlin" hangs above it on the wall and there's a poster of Muhammad Ali as well as placards from past men's boxing championships. A large black banner saying "BCS Boxclub im Seitenwechsel" catches the eye. At "Seitenwechsel" ('change ends'), a women's sports club in Berlin, since 2001 women and girls have been able to train in boxing as well as badminton, basketball and football. The BCS boxing club is the only women's boxing club in Europe. At the moment about 60 female boxers are registered with the club, and in a girls sports project called "BOXGIRLS" ten girls are learning this ancient art of combat with the fists.'

Learning to defend yourself



On to the upper arms: the girls support themselves on boxes behind them and then lift themselves into the air. The trainer watches, correcting their positions, praising them or encouraging them to work harder. The girls in the BOXGIRLS project are between eight and 16 years old. The youngest, Serena, has braided her hair like Regina Halmich's and is very enthusiastic about the project. Her mother Moana sits at the side with a grin on her face as she watches the eight year old training. "Serena insisted on doing a combat sport", she tells

us, "and since we live near here, we chose boxing". The project went into Serena's school touting for members. When her daughter is old enough she wants to take part in fights, Moana tells us quite matter of factly. Young girls and boys are allowed to take part in fights from the age of ten, provided they have the necessary skills. The girls build up their fitness and strength, learn the techniques and train their reflexes and sense of balance in weekly training sessions. Once they have fully mastered the defensive techniques they are allowed to box against each other, so-called sparring, provided they are wearing protective headgear and mouth guards.

The extensive fitness and strength training is finished for today; now the girls are practising their boxing moves. With both hands clenched into fists in front of their faces in the defensive stance, their feet glide over the ground - forwards, backwards, and sideways. The steps may look really easy when the trainer does them, but the beginners find this unusual way of moving trickier. The trainer praises Serena's steps and the young girl looks over proudly to her mother.

The BOXGIRLS will receive financial support for three years from a programme called *MädchenStärken* ('stronger girls') run by the German Children and Youth Foundation together with the sports clothes and equipment producer Nike. The program aims to help girls conquer sports that were previously considered the domain of boys. The goal is to increase self-confidence and courage, especially among girls and young women from socially disadvantaged families. MädchenStärken also aspires to promote a contemporary understanding of roles. In addition to the sports offered, there are also training workshops. Moreover, the participants get involved in the planning and implementation of their project themselves. The Federal Ministry of the Interior supported BOXGIRLS 2005 as a model project within the UN's Year of Sport. The central aim of the project for the ministry was to "Promote the Integration of Migrants in Germany through Sport". About half of the BOXGIRLS come from migrant families. Boxing workshops and demonstrations in schools also aimed to increase acceptance for girls' amateur boxing.

"Boxing – but that's brutal!"

While women's professional boxing is becoming increasingly accepted in Germany, especially thanks to the world champion Regina Halmich, who fills halls with her fights and enjoys good television ratings, amateurs are still confronted with comments like, "boxing, but that's so brutal!". Sarah, the trainer, responds to such comments with quiet confidence, saying, "Sport can help alleviate aggression. Also, the amateurs wear protective headwear for the fights, and if there's ever a risk of someone getting hurt, the referee breaks off the fight." The aim of amateur boxing is not to knock out the opponent, but to get the highest number of points through speed, tactics and good style.

The German Boxing Association (DBV) wants to promote women's boxing, as Alexander Mazur, Vice President for Competitive Sport", emphasised to the *Berliner Zeitung*. Mazur also hopes that women's boxing will be recognised as a discipline in the 2012 Olympics. Until now the Olympic Committee has taken the view that women's boxing is not yet at the standard required. Sarah would also like to see more support and more respect for women's amateur boxing in Germany. As she says, "women are not just beautiful, they are smart, they have stamina, quick reactions, and are physically and mentally strong – in other words very well suited to boxing!"

The girls in the boxing club in Kreuzberg stretch their arms and legs; they've sweated enough for today. Strolling over to the changing rooms joking about, they don't take any notice of boxing idol Muhammad Ali on the wall. After all, they're strong themselves.

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<http://www.goethe.de/ges/soz/thm/fdb/en2080870.htm>

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