

WHY I JOINED THE LADIES WHO PUNCH

Inspired by Nicola Adams's historic Olympic gold, *Lucy Fry* decided to jump into the ring and give women's boxing a go – with life-changing results

Photographs JOE PLIMMER

Have you ever had a single thought that turned into something life defining? Mine came on 9 August 2012 when I sat on my sofa and watched in awe as a then 29-year-old Nicola Adams fought her way to a gold medal in the first ever Olympic games to include women's boxing. What does it feel like, I wondered, to step into the ring and do battle; to be hit and not falter, to punch and stay calm?

Like many women, I had often punched bags in the gym for fitness purposes and dreamt of taking my training to a new level. I wanted to see what I was capable of – just how strong and powerful I could become when truly pushed, as professional boxers are – but dismissed it as pure fantasy. Because boxing isn't just about sky-high fitness levels, it's also about fighting. The truth is that the very idea of being hit, especially in the face, terrified me; boxing 'proper' was something that other tougher, stronger women did.

But now here I was, questioning myself. Granted, Nicola Adams is a different height and weight to me and would thus compete in a different category, but she hardly looks like a killer. The speed of her reactions was what I was drawn to. She's aggressive, sure, but in a skilful way; she avoids punches as much as she delivers them and her strength is clear from her lithe, muscular physique. Hers doesn't seem to be a sport of brawling, or of unfettered fury, and although she is, quite clearly, a champion among champions, what really divides us is the years she has spent training. Could I have just the tiniest bit of Adams's experience if I put in a fraction of the time and effort that she has? I remembered a favourite phrase of mine: 'Life begins at the edge of your comfort zone.' I



Above left: Nicola Adams celebrates her Olympic gold-medal win. Above right and opposite: Lucy gets ready for her first white-collar match

believed in this adage, so why wasn't I living it?

As with so many things in life, once you start opening your mind, eyes and heart to something, it appears to have been there all along. Within a matter of weeks, a series of circumstances had led to me meeting with ex-professional boxer Cathy Brown, former flyweight European champion (and the second British female ever to turn professional), who works as a personal trainer and boxing coach at London's exclusive Third Space gym. The majority of those who join Cathy's boxing classes enjoy the non-contact side of the sport. They understand the aesthetic benefits as well as the emotional and mental release that come from putting on gloves and hitting pads; they want to do the body-conditioning drills (such as press-ups and sit-ups) that get boxers so fit. Most of all, they love her no-nonsense teaching style.

Although I went on to be part of a relatively small

group of members who actually get in the ring to spar with one another, I too was drawn to boxing with Cathy for all those reasons. At 42 years of age, 5ft 1in, blonde, beautiful and exuding confidence, she's a woman who knows how good she is at her job, and it's infectious. I quickly realised that she was the best and so asked tentatively if she thought she could train me to fight. She looked me up and down, made me throw a few punches and agreed (I discovered later that she wasn't sure if I had the necessary grit to box – something it took me a few weeks to find and prove). But there was a problem. The next white-collar fight night (ie, unlicensed, so anybody can take part, as opposed to amateur boxing of the Olympic kind, or the big-money professional

bouts) was only a few weeks away. It was now mid-September. We had just 60 days to train me for the fight on 16 November. It might just be enough, said Cathy, but I'd have to commit 100 per cent to the training, change my lifestyle – and do exactly as I was told. There was one thing that she promised in return, though – the experience would change my life for ever.

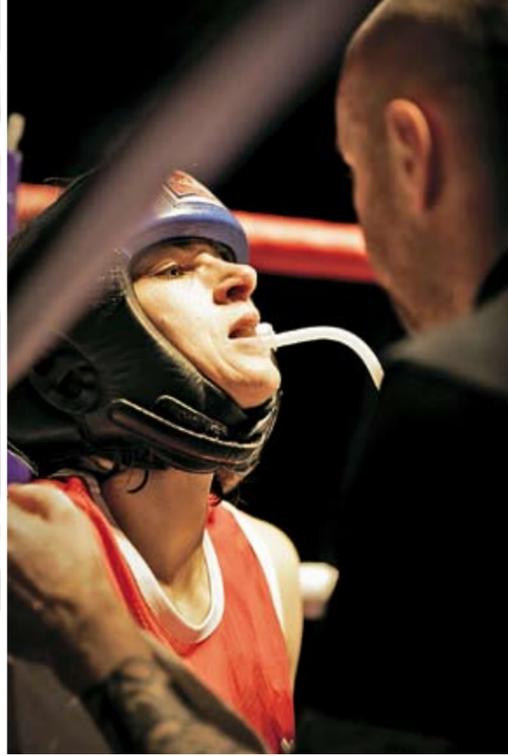
And so it begins. There's no time for easing me in; the first week starts as the others will continue, with an average of three hours' training a day (a morning and evening session to fit around my work), six days a week, spent doing a mixture of sprints, weights, punching the bag and pads, full-contact sparring classes and one-to-one sessions with Cathy. I realise very quickly that this is going to take me to places I've never been to before. My body is being pushed to new limits – my calves are constantly tight from moving around in a boxer's stance (where the rear heel is elevated), my chest and shoulder muscles ache every day from the punching and press-ups. One day I am instructed to practise slips (where a boxer ducks ►

'If you have any demons lying dormant, boxing training will root them out'





Above left: Lucy's corner man Richie Kyle briefs her before the bout. Left: Cathy Brown tapes up Lucy's hands. Right: between rounds, Richie gives Lucy water and tactical pointers



Left: Lucy's opponent was Nicola Hudson from Essex. Above: 40 friends and family turned up to support Lucy, including her partner Bella, centre. Right: boxing coach and mentor Cathy Brown



◀ to one side to avoid an oncoming punch) so much that the next day the sides of my stomach feel almost torn they are so taut. By the end of week one and my first ever full-contact sparring session, I've taken a few hard hits. During the third week I suffer my first bloody nose, and in the fifth I am knocked to the floor. Yet, bizarrely, I find strength in these experiences, each of them causing me to feel relief as yet another supposedly scary thing happens and I come out smiling (although I haven't broken my nose or suffered concussion, the two greatest risks I believe I face with this kind of training).

But it's not all elation and boundary-breaking. Most evenings I return home from training drained and speechless.

'I hate what this fight is doing to you,' says my partner Bella, as I apologise, again, for being moodier and snappier than normal. I no longer want to socialise and stop going out for dinner with friends, choosing instead to prepare the correct, nutrient-dense food for the five to six meals a day that I need to eat in order to sustain my body and mind through such a gruelling regime.

More than this, though, some very intense emotions are rearing their ugly heads. Speak to anybody who's been there and they'll agree – if you have any demons lying dormant, boxing training will root them out. For me, it's the battle against the voice within that says 'I can't' – often, just the act of returning to the gym for an evening session while still aching from the morning's exertions, particularly with the dark winter nights, is a huge challenge. Then there's the obsession, the inability to switch off from it all, that engulfs me. On the sofa, in the bath, in bed... I close my eyes and

find myself dancing around the ring, my neuromuscular system now so accustomed to the movements that they've become embedded in my psyche as much as my body.

But it's not just my mind and body (or my opponents) that I'm fighting with this challenge, it's other people's opinions too. Boxing (and women's boxing in particular) polarises opinion. On the one hand there is much positive feeling among my sportier friends, or those who come out of the woodwork as having a secret penchant for the sport. My parents, on the other hand, are clearly worried; they have no frame of reference when it comes to any combat sport and are anxious that I might get hurt (my mother said later that she felt a mixture of 'sheer pride and utter terror' about the whole thing). But they are my parents, after all, and will always veer on the side of overprotectiveness, despite assurances that my compulsory headguard and mouth guard really do help shield me (they must be worn in all white-collar and amateur boxing, whereas professionals go without protective headgear).

It's the negative comments from friends and acquaintances, those who insist I am 'crazy', raising the possibility that I might be 'brain damaged', that upset me more. But even this, however tactless, is tolerable – people have their reasons for disliking boxing, a sport which, although I consider it more like a physical game of chess than two people beating each other up,

certainly has a gruesome, violent edge. What I find unacceptable is that there are those who seem only to dislike women's boxing. 'I'm sorry,' they say (although they clearly aren't), 'but I just feel uncomfortable watching women hit each other.' When asked why they feel this way, it usually boils down to the fact that they find it 'unfeminine'. This is especially ridiculous as what constitutes feminine is subjective and, in the boxing ring, irrelevant.

But now, standing on the stage of the iconic, shabby, atmospheric fighting venue that is York Hall in London's Bethnal Green, about to walk into the ring, I don't give a moment's thought to such opinions. The old me might have cared, but this one doesn't. Something about the ceaseless training, forever outside my comfort zone, has taught me that it doesn't matter what most people think. I've developed a thicker skin (as well as a few pounds of lean muscle mass) and, in fact, I hardly recognise myself. I am

dressed in bright red Lonsdale vest and boxing shorts and black boxing boots. My hair is braided at the front, my hands are protected with wraps and tape. I can see my shoulder muscles and triceps flickering threateningly out of the corner of my eyes. I am 31 years old and I have never been so nervous in my life.

'I can do this,' I think. 'I am strong enough.' 'Ready?' asks Cathy, and I nod.

Her eyes fill with tears. Over the past 60 days she has been my coach, my mentor and my

'I can feel the flush of adrenalin in my legs as I walk through the crowds to the ring, music booming from the stereo'

counsellor, walking alongside me on this journey without a moment's respite. Hers are tears of pride, I know; this is a sport she truly loves and she understands what it takes to step into the ring, put on your gloves and give it everything – repeat, everything – you've got.

I can feel the flush of adrenalin in my legs as I walk through the crowds into the ring, the sound of my chosen music (a suitably aggressive hip-hop track) booming from the stereo. I'm flanked by my corner man for the bout, Richie Kyle, fellow Third Space personal trainer and friend of Cathy's.

Due to having a professional boxing licence, Cathy cannot walk me into the ring, or be in my corner, offering advice between rounds. This will be difficult for both of us; we've grown so accustomed to each other that she knows exactly what words and phrases to use to bolster me.

But now it's up to me, Lucy 'Firework' Fry, to live up to my chosen ring name (rather than the less explosive 'Sparkler', suggested affectionately to me early on by my coach). And here's my opponent, Nicola Hudson, who prefers not to use a ring name, saying that she'd 'like to earn one one day' and who trains at Lions Gym in Chelmsford, Essex.

I had no idea until now who my opposite would be, just that she would be of a similar height and weight to me and roughly matched in ability. I later find out she's 25, has been training for a couple of years, after what started as an endeavour to lose weight became a love affair with the sport. She says, 'Mentally it can be quite challenging, especially the sparring. I've often stepped out of the ring feeling like I've just been someone's

punchbag, but then I'll chat to my sparring partner and realise that they feel the same!'

A quick chat from the referee and it's on. The bell goes, marking the beginning of three two-minute rounds in the first of the evening's four female bouts. It may only make up a quarter of the night's matches, but it's still impressive, considering Dominic Shepherd, the show's promoter, says, 'Before tonight, I have only ever featured two female bouts in the ten years that I have been promoting white-collar boxing.'

I feel strong and fierce and deliver flurries of punches wherever possible, enlivened by the 500 or so spectators and the hoarse voices of my supporters (who include my father, sister, cousins, partner and more than 40 friends) screaming my name. The first round is over already. The din is deafening but I listen intently to the wise words of my corner man Richie, hoping that they compute. 'Slow down,' he says. 'Stay calm.' I nod, feeling the luminosity of this moment as it tickles the hairs on the back of my neck.

During the second round I take a few more punches than I'd like (one, in particular, straight on the nose), although with all the adrenalin they feel lighter now than they will tomorrow, no doubt.

The third round is a blur; my body takes over and most of what I do is instinctive. This is where hours of repetitious training, especially the night-time rounds of sparring when already exhausted from earlier hours of exercise, come into their own and save me from meltdown. I am not conscious of anything, I just know that I can empty the tank because after this it is all over. Quickly, too quickly, the bell goes. I am relieved and euphoric.

Have I won, is the next question? Apparently

not, but I haven't lost either; at tonight's event, London Calling, the fights are 'no contest' (there are no official winners or losers) and the referee actively discourages knockouts. Blood is forgiven, however (especially if it's coming from the nose), as is the odd tumble, but each fighter receives a trophy after they finish.

Previously I might have welcomed such a sporting attitude ('I don't want anybody to go home a loser,' says Dominic), but tonight I am frustrated. I have trained either to win, triumphant, or to lose, fair and square.

But win, lose or draw, there's one thing of which I'm certain, that Cathy was right: the experience of training for and completing my first fight has changed my life for the better.

Now when I'm facing a difficult situation (perhaps when I'm feeling despondent about something, or under pressure to stand my ground), I close my eyes and try to remember the self-belief that I felt just before entering the ring. I recall the gruelling training with Cathy and how, even in my darkest moments, regardless of what I thought or felt, I continued to put in the work and turn up for training.

With this I keep alive the greatest lesson I have learnt from boxing (one that I'm sure both Nicola Adams and Cathy Brown learned early on in their fighting careers): that true strength is defined by commitment and dedication, as much as it is by the power of your punches. Remember that and, whatever the outcome of any of life's battles, victory will be yours. ■

For information about boxing training, visit cathybrown.co.uk and thethirdspace.com