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# Lady boxers toss opinions into ring about Ali-Frazier match

## WOMEN'S BOXING

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who trains three hours a day, six days a week with the goal of one day becoming a professional boxer. Ward recently punched her way toward her dream of going pro at a match at a VFW in Quincy.

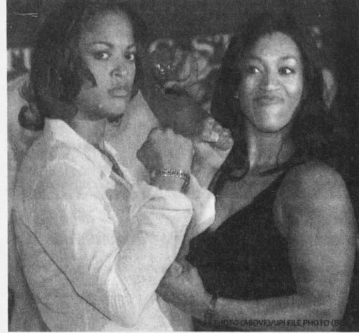
Ali and Frazier-Lyde skipped this amateur route, landing professional gigs that bring them a reported \$25,000 a battle. Sure, their flashy names summon up memories of the three epic Ali-Frazier battles in the 1970s, but few expect the Ali and Frazier-Lyde match-up to approach the "thrilla" their fathers gave boxing fans in Manila.

"When that happened they were the two best fighters," says Raphaella Johnson, 31, a petite boxing veteran who became the first woman to win the Golden Gloves of New England in 1996. "There was so much talk before that one. People are still talking about it."

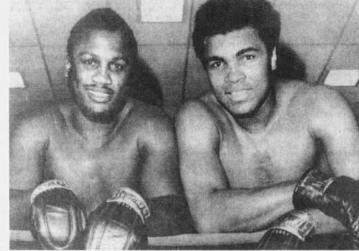
"This one, nobody really knows anything about either fighter," Johnson continues. "You see Laila Ali showing up in Cosmo with her nails and it's all fluff. To me, there's nothing really admirable about it."

Women's boxing had been inching toward the mainstream long before Ali and Frazier-Lyde hit the circuit. There are now more than 1,500 women registered as amateurs with USA Boxing and their numbers continue to rise. Plans are in the works to add the sport to the Olympics.

Female boxers here speak the names of Christy Martin and Holland's Lucia Rijker with hushed respect for elevating the game. Yet they voice frustration that beauty and a famous name are what draw people to women's boxing. While public anticipation inspired "TV Guide" to slap a photo of Ali and Frazier-Lyde on its cover, women like Ward and Johnson just hope the pair don't do irreparable damage by dissolving into a catfight that leaves casino viewers hissing



Laila Ali (above left) fights Jacqui Frazier-Lyde tomorrow night. They are the daughters of legendary boxers Muhammad Ali (below right) and Joe Frazier, pictured in 1974.



in their \$50-to-\$300 seats.

"It's sort of a double-edged sword for women's boxing," says Alyssa Shaffer, an editor at Sports Illustrated for Women. "On the one hand, it's very good publicity in terms of just raising overall awareness about the sport... because people know these names. It can also hurt a little bit because it's not going to be a really good fight."

The reluctance to give Ali and Frazier-Lyde their due is partially caused by the pair's undefeated cakewalk into the battle. Both fought beatable opponents who barely knew their way around the ring. The resentment also stems from the competitiveness of their weight division (165 pounds and greater), says Ann Marie Francey, a boxer from Somerville who

## A chronology of women's boxing

**1726:** London stages the first women's fights, which allows them to punch, maul, scratch and throw their way to victory.

**1876:** Nell Saunders and Rose Harland box in New York City reportedly for a silver butter dish.

**1920s:** Boxing is used to physically train young ladies in Boston.

**1954:** Barbara Buttrick, whom Women Boxing Archive Network calls one of the most famous women's boxers of all-time, is the first female boxer to have her fight broadcast on national television.

**1967:** Lady Tiger Trinnar, a former women's lightweight boxing champion, and two other women boxers go on a hunger strike demanding major network coverage of female fights, economic parity for women on professional boxing cards and the promotion of boxing as self-defense for women.

**1993:** USA Boxing recognizes female boxers after losing a landmark court case.

**1996:** Christy Martin and Desiree Cooney enchant boxing fans (and 11 million TV viewers) with their skills in an undercard match preceding a heavyweight bout between Mike Tyson and Frank Bruno.

**1997:** USA Boxing holds its first Women's National Championships.

**2001:** Fights will fly as Christy Martin and Lucia Rijker meet later this year in a highly anticipated fight.

SOURCE: Women Boxing Archive Network

this fight is Ali's to lose. At Farrell's Boxing Gym, Kalus, an 18-year-old who began fighting seven months ago and won the Golden Gloves in Lowell in February, and Marisol Vidal, 24, of Brockton, dissect Ali and Frazier-Lyde's talents.

"The guy who's my coach says she's a solid fighter," Kalus says of Ali. The recent high school graduate whom gym owner Jimmy Farrell Jr. gushes "looks like a movie star" enters the University of Massachusetts at Amherst in the fall.

Vidal, who boxes after work to release tension, muses, "Jacqui, I don't know."

"We don't hear about her," reasons Kalus, "so it must mean she isn't that good."

Inside World Gym in Somerville, Dawn Alexander prepares to spar with Johnson, who trains female boxers age 8 and older in the Olympic style for Somerville Boxing Club. "Our goal as amateurs," explains Johnson, "is to go to the Olympics rather than turn professional because at least I feel that's more of an honorable goal."

Honor isn't the word that popped into Johnson's head after she saw a photo of a victorious Ali standing over her competitor after Ali's debut fight. "Probably the reason she knocked her out is she got lucky because the other girl had no experience, either, and they were just kind of wildly going at it," says Johnson. "That doesn't show any skill. To me, it doesn't show anything. It's just like a farce."

Alexander, 28, a photojournalism student at the New England School of Photography, also watched Ali pummel her opponent during that debut battle. "I wasn't really expecting much," she says. "I don't think she'd ever even had a fight in front of people before."

Johnson thinks the path Ali and Frazier-Lyde took to professional boxing sets a bad example for young girls. "It's safer to prac-

tice a lot in amateurs," she says, "and become a professional when you're really good instead of just turning professional and going out there with no protection and just kind of hoping that everything will be all right."

During boxing's long history, women fighters have entered the field both ways. In 1720s London, females punched, scratched, and kicked their way to victory. These days, the sport has dropped its novelty status thanks to Martin and Rijker, whose pairing later this year already has female fight fans jabbering.

Yet local boxers realize it's not skills but beauty and a recognizable name that will earn them big bucks and land them on the fight cards of famous male boxers. This is a sport where an appearance in "Playboy" magazine helped boxer Mia St. John sign a contract with veteran boxing promoter Bob Arum. So Francey sets her boxing gloves on battling Martin or another pro-fighter's daughter, Freeda Foreman, to gain some fame.

"They get paid \$25,000 for their name," explains Francey of Ali and Frazier-Lyde. "If I were to step in the ring with them, I'd probably not get even a quarter of that."

Back at Farrell's, Vidal is remembering the last Ali battle she saw. "Leila held her own; she did pretty well. The other lady was, like," Vidal fails her arms and growls. "You know, when you get tired you start swinging."

The prospect of watching two daughters of professional boxers windmill their way through a fight is what really bothers serious women boxers.

"The thing is, it's like a girl fight," says Kalus, "it's like a chick fight. We don't want it to be a chick fight — Well here, take your gloves off and scratch each other's eyes out." That's not what boxing's about.

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