

House of Boxing August 21, 2001

Yvonne Caples: For the Love of the Game

By Thomas Gerbasi

This is the side of boxing that doesn't make the front pages. Laila Ali and Jaqui Frazier aside, in women's boxing there are no pay-per-views or press tours. In fact, for fighters like junior flyweight Yvonne Caples, she's lucky if she gets a week's notice in her young career.

"I think I might fight next Friday in LA against Para Draine," Caples told the House.

And despite her record (4-3-1), the Las Vegan is one of the best fighters in her weight class. See, at this point in the development of women's boxing, the best are forced to fight the best; not for super purses or worldwide exposure, but just to stay active. As Caples says, "It's a little bit difficult, but it's so hard to get fights anyway, so I'm grateful when I can get one. I'm kind of used to it, so it really doesn't bother me too much as long as I've been training and I'm in shape."

Born in Pune, India, not exactly the hot bed of boxing, the 29-year old Caples compiled a 13-4 amateur record that included a national championship, before turning pro in September of 1999. "Having an amateur career was very important," she said. "I think it's crazy to go straight into the pros. I'm really grateful for all my amateur experience. And just going to the big tournaments was great and a lot of fun. It was wonderful to be around all these other female boxers, and meet all these different people. And I started my pro career at a different level than a lot of other people.

Such an amateur background, according to Caples, is what the sport needs to get to a higher level. "If women's boxing can become an Olympic sport and if girls start at an earlier age and get the amateur experience, the skill level will be so much higher."

Needless to say, her family wasn't too thrilled about having a boxer in the family. "Initially they were against it, but over the years they've seen how committed I am to it, and how important it is to me so they've come around," said Caples. "My mother has never been able to come watch me fight. She'll watch my fights on video afterwards but she won't come to a fight."

Before boxing, the Caples family made sure Yvonne got her education, with a B.A. in English from UC-Berkeley being the result. She taught high school English in California before moving to Las Vegas, where she now makes her living teaching conflict resolution to kids.

“They think it’s neat,” said Caples, about the kids she teaches. “It’s the last thing you would expect me to do, just from looking at me and talking with me. I’m kind of a soft-spoken, small person, and a woman.”

“My first year I taught a program called ‘Opportunity’ which was for kids that were kicked out of class because they had 15 suspensions.” Caples continues. “I had 18 students, with 16 boys and 2 girls. I took them all to the gym and let them spar with me. We didn’t have any problems after that.”

So how does Caples balance teaching and boxing, two of the more demanding professions out there? “I haven’t had it any other way,” she said. “I’ve always had to work. But it’s still difficult. It’s hard to manage everything.”

But at this stage, that’s the nature of the women’s boxing game unless your father was a great fighter 30 years ago. Does Caples think that the sport will ever rise above the level it’s at now? “I would hope so, but I’m not counting on it,” she admits. “I think for the next generation definitely. I figure I’ll probably box for another four or five more years and in that time I don’t foresee this becoming a lucrative thing for me. I’m in this because I love it, and the money has never been that important for me.”

Doesn’t fighting seem to be an irrational act from such an intelligent lady, though, especially given the recent tragedy of Beethavean Scotland? “I definitely think about the risks,” said Caples. “I don’t care what anyone says, taking blows to the head can’t be healthy. I worry about that some. I’ve kind of put a limit for myself in that I’m not going to box more than four or five more years.”

So what keeps her in a sport that has so much risk, and has provided, thus far, so little reward? “I really love it,” said Caples. “When I first took up boxing, I thought that if I could be good at boxing I could do anything. And I’ve dedicated all these years to it, so it’s important for me to take it as far as I can.”

For Caples, her goals in the sport are “a world title, and to fight everyone who I consider to be the top competition. I want to push myself to the limit of my abilities.” If she gets a win against Draine, another overlooked contender, she may get closer to that elusive title shot. But at 108 pounds, finding fights are never easy.

“That’s exactly why I moved to Vegas,” Caples admits. “It’s too early to tell but I’m happy with my move. I have a great trainer here (Leroy Caldwell), and I’m real happy. I don’t have any regrets about moving. I was in the Bay area and there’s just no boxing there at all.”

Caples does see a light at the end of the tunnel for the sport though, despite the negative connotation attached by some to women’s boxing. “The fight with Christy Martin and Deirdre Gogarty kind of put women’s boxing on the map,” she said. “But then Don King really started protecting her and putting in all these horrible opponents and her drawing power dropped. I think Mia St. John detracts from the sport. She makes

it seem like a joke. But ESPN2 is starting show women's fights regularly, and good matchups, so that's good," Caples continues. "It's becoming more of the norm. It's not like, 'Oh let's watch these two women fight.' When the commentators talk about the fighters they're talking more about their skill, and their strengths and weaknesses. Women's boxing is definitely here to stay. I think in about five years the general public will be ready for tit."

And even if Yvonne Caples isn't around to reap the benefits of public acceptance, she has no regrets. "In the future I hope to be involved in a lot of exciting fights and hopefully become a world champion," she said. "And even after I retire I hope to stay involved with women's boxing to help it grow."

"The worst for me is putting in so much hard work and not getting an opportunity to fight, or that the offers for purses seem to be getting lower instead of higher," Caples continues. "That's a little bit disappointing. But boxing has been very good to me and very positive, and I don't have any regrets about being involved. I love it."