

Oakland Tribune
Sunday, January 4, 1998

Teacher Goes the Extra Round

By Brenda Payton

She looks like a poet or an artist. She has large, dreamy brown eyes, a slight build and slender, delicate hands. She is bashful and soft spoken when you meet her. She majored in English at the University of California at Berkeley and teaches 7th and 8th grade in El Cerrito. She could be a school teacher who writes poetry.

Yvonne Caples is a school teacher. But she doesn't write poetry in her spare time. She boxes. That's correct. I didn't hit the wrong keys. Caples, who weighs 106 pounds soaking wet, is a slugger in the ring.

In August, she was named Outstanding Boxer at the Roseville tournament –that was outstanding boxer including men and women. And she took second place in the Blue and Gold tournament, defeating a woman who weighed 119 pounds.

“I started boxing four years ago,” she says. She had always been athletic, playing basketball and volleyball, running track, and she was looking for a new sport. A male friend took her to a boxing gym. “I found it to be challenging. At first I was terrible at it. And I thought, if I can do boxing, I can do anything.”

She started training by jumping rope, working out with the heavy bag, developing her footwork and learning punches. People began complimenting her on her speed and determination. And then she sparred for the first time.

“It was a little intimidating,” she says. That's an understatement. Her opponent was a 140 pound ex-Marine. “I didn't do that well. I took a beating. I wasn't afraid; I was humiliated.”

But she came back. She was hooked on the sport and she wanted to get good at it.

“She's tough,” says Stanley Garcia who runs the East Oakland Boxing Association where Caples works out.

In the ring, Caples is more of a dancer than a slugger. Her feet are quick and in constant motion. She moves on her toes, her right foot stepping forward and then back. She throws a right/left combination and tags her opponent with her left. In the ring, her eyes are framed by the boxing headgear and they're no longer dreamy; they're fierce.

“Keep your eyes open. Keep your eyes open,” advises Coach Paul Wright as Caples and another woman spar. Wright coached for Floyd Patterson's manager. At one

point he stopped the action because a mouthpiece was on the canvas –except it wasn't a mouthpiece; it was a hair barrette. I asked him what he thinks about women boxing.

“I was queasy about it at first, coming from the old school,” Wright says. “But it's like everything else, it's changing. Women are playing basketball now. I love to watch women's basketball. And women should know how to protect themselves. Yvonne's on the brink of being a pro. Her only problem is there aren't enough women boxers her style and weight to give her enough bouts.”

She has plans to turn pro this month. Her goal is to win the Women's Flyweight World Championship.

Caples' next sparring partner is one of her students. She uses the gym as an incentive for them to behave and do their work. She dances and ducks to the left, slipping his punches. He doesn't make it to the bell; he sprawls out on the canvas exhausted.

After five rounds, Caples is sweating but barely breathing heavily.

“I think men and women are more alike than different,” she said. “I think women want to box for the same reasons men want to.” She said the sport has increased her self confidence.

“You feel strong. It's an incredible workout. You learn discipline and focus. Being in shape gives you a lot of confidence. I used to have a dream that someone was attacking me and I couldn't fight or scream. I don't have that nightmare anymore.”