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Jessica Zigman

Why is this Northshore premed student drawn to the boxing ring?

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Million dollar question

Punch. Counter punch. Dodge. Feint. The world of amateur boxing is fraught with black eyes, bloody noses and split lips — so what makes a female premed student from the Northshore decide to become a boxer?

Story by Larry Widen · Photography by Nathan Harrmann



Whitefish Bay's Jessica Zigman walked into the gym at United Community Center on Milwaukee's South Side five years ago as a 16-year-old seeking to get back in playing shape after a soccer injury. "I'm not the same person I was before I began boxing," she says.

At first pass, Jessica Zigman seems to be a fairly typical young woman from a nice middle class family. She's attractive, outgoing and smart. As a junior at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Zigman is majoring in medicine. There is one other thing — she is a highly skilled competitive boxer with the tools to flatten most of her male classmates.

At age 21, Zigman is already a five-year veteran of boxing with countless hours of training and more than a dozen matches under her belt. Even after all this time, her

"I will never get used to the sound of 500 people cheering when my daughter gets punched in the face."
Karen Zigman

parents, Cary and Karen Zigman, admit they have trouble keeping their emotions under control before she steps into the ring.

Although highly supportive of her daughter's decision to box, Karen Zigman says it doesn't get easier to watch her fight. "I'm very impressed with the discipline, focus and other life skills that a person can learn from boxing," she says. "But I will never get used to the sound of 500 people cheering when my daughter gets punched in the face."

It is particularly difficult for the Zigmans on the evening that Jessica is fighting in a

tournament that will determine the women's state champion in the 125-pound division. They know that when a boxer reaches this level, the opponents are tougher and more experienced. The Zigmans' tension ratchets up incrementally while they watch the seven bouts before Jessica's. As career health care professionals, they are well aware of the risks that boxers take each time they fight competitively. "I can handle the shiners or a bloody nose," Karen Zigman says. "It's the potential brain damage or vision

impairment that I worry about. Frankly, I much preferred going to her soccer matches.

Finally, it's time for Zigman's match. She's fighting out of the red corner against Ann Julia Smalls, a lanky bundle of energy from Peshtigo, Wis. As the fighters wait for the bell, Zigman punches herself in the head once or twice. "She told me why she does that," her mother whispers. "Psychologically, it's better not to take the first punch from someone else."

From the start it is apparent that amateur boxing is different than its professional counterpart. The fighters wear protective headgear and a physician is stationed ringside to immediately stop any bout before serious injury can occur. With the bell still echoing through the room, Zigman and Smalls engage in a furious exchange of punches at the center of the ring.

Zigman was introduced to boxing after she suffered a knee injury in 1996 that made it difficult to continue playing competitive soccer. "I initially chose taekwondo (a form of high-impact aerobics that combines the moves of karate, boxing and ballet) because I thought it would help me get back in shape to play soccer," she says. "But very quickly I became interested in learning about actual boxing."

Shortly after, the teen from Whitefish Bay signed on with the highly regarded boxing program at the United Community Center. Located in the heart of Milwaukee's Hispanic neighborhood at 9th Street and National Avenue, the UCC serves the social, medical and athletic needs of the area.

Even though she comes from a different neighborhood and is one of only a few female boxers in the program, Zigman says she never felt like an outsider. "I felt an instant bond with everyone at UCC," she says. "And making all these new friends has really opened up my eyes to other cultures and other kinds of people."

Coach Israel "Shorty" Acosta says Zigman embodies the spirit of the program he created. "This isn't about going pro and making a lot of money," he says. "This is about acquiring skills and the tools to become successful in life." Acosta, a United States Olympic Team boxer in 1980 and 1984, says his goal is to help young men and women mature into responsible adults. "We teach attitude here, that's the No. 1 thing," he says. "With a positive attitude, you can overcome any obstacle in life."



Zigman won the state women's boxing championship in her weight class in 2001 and 2002. She is studying medicine at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and hopes to become a pediatrician providing health services to underprivileged children.



Zigman's fellow boxers say she has that positive attitude. Mike Gonzalez says it was easy to become Zigman's friend from the minute she walked in the door. "She's so warm and friendly to everyone, and her personality just makes it fun to be around her." Gonzalez says that even though there aren't many women in the UCC program, it makes no difference to the other boxers. "We show the obvious respect and courtesies that a female is entitled to, but other than that there's no special treatment," he says. "We're all here to work out and help each other become better at the sport."

Melissa Ramirez says Zigman's drive and determination are contagious. "She is such a positive influence on all of us. Some days I may not feel like working out, but she'll get me motivated, and I love that about her."

For the first three rounds of the fight, Zigman and Smalls are trading punches pretty evenly. It isn't until the fourth and final round that Smalls becomes dominant. The Peshtigo fighter's tall, gangly frame, coupled with long arms, gives her a height and reaches advantage over Zigman, making it harder for the smaller fighter to get inside. Although she's able to overcome the physical disparities in the early rounds, her exhaustion in the fourth leaves Zigman open to punches that score points. In the end, the decision goes to Smalls, who, as state champion, advances to the regional tournament.

Zigman prepares to return to Madison and resume her life as a student, at least for the time being. "She's going to a tournament in Iowa next week," her mother says. "Now I can be worried all over again."

Though Zigman is obviously disappointed with the outcome, she's far from discouraged. She's already won the state women's championship twice before, in 2001 and 2002. She says what really matters to her is the experience she's having along the way.

Becoming friends with so many people in the Hispanic community has motivated her to become proficient in Spanish. Her skill in the ring has resulted in an annual scholarship from the USA Boxing Commission that is applied to her tuition at Madison. And she has sharpened her career focus considerably, indicating an intention to become a pediatrician providing health services to underprivileged children.

"I'm not the same person I was before I began boxing," Zigman says. "I feel I've been exposed to a whole new world, and I wouldn't trade this for anything." ❧

