

Floats like a butterfly, stings with a knee

HANRIE BOSCH

"I WAS FAMOUS for my knees. I have knocked someone out with my knees... I even think I felt a girl's spine as I kneed her in the stomach once."

It is somewhat hard to believe that these words come from a petite and beautiful blue-eyed blonde. But looks can be deceiving – Olivia Jackson was rated the number one female fighter in the world in 2009 by the World Muay Thai Federation, and took the title of South African Muay Thai champion in 2004.

More recently, this relentless warrior has started doing stunt work in movies, specialising, of course, in fight scenes. On top of that, she's a trainer and manager at The Armoury, a boxing club in Woodstock, and somehow still finds the time to work as a model.

With over 10 years' full-time professional training in martial arts, and five of those spent training and living in the heart of Muay Thai in Thailand, Jackson is no stranger to bruises, cuts, black eyes and sexist remarks in an arena once dominated by masculinity.

"I got into Muay Thai because of modelling, just to keep fit," she recalls. "I really enjoyed it, and started competing in fights – but eventually it didn't go down so well with the modelling, what with all of the cuts, bruises and black eyes."

This didn't stop her, though, and before long she was starved for competition. "There weren't really any female competitors around for me to fight in SA, so I went to Thailand to compete professionally," she explains.

Sexism is a constant presence in the world of boxing, Jackson says, but it's far worse in the male-dominated culture of South East Asia. "I realised that women fight for passion – men do it for money," Jackson reveals.

"Women get paid much less for a fight. Women would get about 30 000 Thai Baht (around R7 000) for a fight, and men would get between 50 000 and 60 000 [R12 000 to R14 000]."

"I started training at a world-famous gym in Thailand with people from all over the world, but there was a certain part of



FEMME FATAL: Between fights Jackson is a successful model.



ROLL WITH IT: Olivia Jackson (right) takes on Tiana "Tiger" Caverly in 2008 at The International Muay Thai Superfight in Malaysia. Photos: Supplied

the gym where no women were allowed – not even their toes.

"Women could also not climb over the ropes when entering the ring; we had to go beneath the bottom rope. But you get used to their way of doing things."

And Jackson certainly did, staying in Thailand to train and fight for just over five years, becoming fluent in Thai and getting more than 29 professional fights under her boxing belt; she even fought at the Thai queen's birthday bash in front of more than 100 000 people, and went on to win the match.

Jackson's reputation spread, and she became known as "Sexy Muay Thai Olivia" to millions of adoring Thai fans, while photos of her were splashed across Thai magazines and newspapers. But Jackson says people often

misconceive what fighting is about, be it Muay Thai or boxing. Rather than being about aggression and size, she says, the art of fighting is about finding yourself and reaching your own limits.

"Never go into a fight and try to hurt someone out of anger or aggression – that's when you will get knocked down," she warns. "During a fight there is a lot of pressure, and the only thing that crosses my mind is not to disappoint myself or my trainer."

"It is not about winning or losing, it is about giving 120 per cent."



ALL IN THE KNEES: Jackson works on perfecting the knee that made her famous