

Rolling With the Punches

Olivia Jackson: from model to champion trainer

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DOES A NAME PREDETERMINE YOUR LIFE COURSE? Olivia Jackson's parents might have held out for a delicate, feminine child, perhaps slightly fey and small framed ... The name does have a pretty ring to it. What they got was a strikingly attractive daughter with Nordic cheekbones, a dimpled chin and eyes the colour of Arctic ice. She's also tall.

So they ended up with a successful international model who, unlike many a former ramp goddess who goes into PR, fashion accessories or saving whales by proxy, became a champion Thai boxer. What began as a kickboxing workout to get into shape for her career turned into what Olivia readily admits was an obsession to be not just fit but a fighter.

At first she tried to mix careers. The trouble with Thai boxing is that it's not play-play stuff. You watch your opponent as closely as you'd watch a cobra, looking for 'tells' – a micro-twitch in a muscle, a slight favouring of stance, a repetitive move that leaves a body area wide open – and then you strike. It can be brutal – and bruises and swimwear shoots make bad bedfellows. It didn't help that Olivia won her first fight and then lost her second bout ending up with a black eye as a trophy. Score Thai boxing one; modelling nil.

Being tall, fair and fierce had something to do with her growing celebrity status in Thailand where she settled – but she was also a damn good boxer. By 2004 she was SA Champion and, in her adopted country, she was voted Number 1 Female Fighter in the world by The World Professional Muay Thai Federation. 'I'm not an aggressive fighter,' she says. 'I prefer to be intelligent in my style.' What she does is keenly observe her opponent and look for advantages in fighting-style patterns.

She came home to SA an unusual route. To continue boxing meant a gruelling regime of eight hours of training every day to hone a body that was as lean as a whippet. She'd lived with other boxers at a training centre in Thailand and life was a routine of training, fighting, kilojoule cramming and one day of rest. Where to next after champion status? For Olivia it was the movies. By 2011 she was performing stunts in *The Impossible* with Ewan McGregor, *Safe House* with Denzel Washington, *The Burma Conspiracy* with Sharon Stone, and *The Hangover Part II* with Bradley Cooper.

Olivia didn't need a body double; she was the body double. Somewhere between it all, she qualified as a nutritionist and a personal trainer with Exercise Teachers Academy (ETA), which is why if she trains you at The Armoury Boxing Club in Cape Town, you're in her hands from the moment you swallow that first low-GI oatmeal breakfast. Olivia has a client who BBM's her on her Blackberry when she's faced with a dietary dilemma. Keeping in touch with her trainer is even reflected in her Facebook status, which is 'happy'. Olivia tackles what's good for your mind and body.

At 30 years old, she's moved on to manage the boxing club and personally train a select group of clients. Just a small word of warning: don't push her to test her. If she goes quiet, narrows her eyes and looks particularly intently at your body, you'll discover quickly that she's much more Million Dollar Baby than former model. □

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Boxing is like a drug. It's one of the few ways to experience the joyous swoop of victory. Enter the ring and all you have to worry about is your opponent. Women like Olivia Jackson have the drive, the determination and the stamina for it

