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### Female fighters fight toward equal footing

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A staple in the boxing world met a primary member of the judo world in an octagon ring housed in the MGM Grand on November 15, 2015. Dubbed by some as the biggest upset of the year, Holly Holm faced off against Ronda Rousey for the Women's UFC Bantamweight championship and delivered the sweet science to Rousey.

Holm also used her kickboxing skills delivering the knockout kick Rousey may or may not have been expecting, but ultimately her striking was very solid.

If the two sports collided in the ring, would this be the outcome? Perhaps or not. The argument if a straight boxer could beat a straight mixed martial artist in a fight is old. They are two completely different sports.

What they do have in common is stacked female divisions. With the likes of Rousey, Holm, and Cecilia Brækhus women's welterweight champion of the WBA, WBC, IBF and WBO, the first woman to do so, both sports are doing great.

But are female fighters having the same experience as their male counterparts? It doesn't seem that way. In both sports, women experience a variety of different things in comparison to men, from maintaining their health to maintaining a healthy revenue flow.

### **Late Launches**

How does the experience differ between the sexes? Historically, both sports had male divisions long before a female division was thought of.

Men's boxing is one of the oldest and most popular sports in the world, but professional women's boxing, despite some subcultures scattered throughout the centuries, is barely two decades old.

The earliest sparks of organized women's boxing came during a brief era in Europe during the 1700s, when patrons would gather to watch staged bareknuckle brawls between women before the work day.

The first reported American female boxing match was held in 1876 in New York City and Women's boxing resurfaced in large again in the early 20th century at the 1904 Olympic games.

The first real rise of women's boxing began in the late 1980's and continued through the 90s. Boxing Associations in European countries like Sweden and England were the foundation for the International Boxing Association at the end of the century. The first European Champions for women's boxing was held in 1999, the first World tournament in 2001. The sport debuted in the 2012 Olympics as a full-fledged event.

Today, women's boxing is still much smaller than men's. For a snapshot, there are 1771 registered amateur male boxers in New York State compared to just 220 women.

Same with MMA. In the beginning, the extreme, gut-wrenching, no-holds barred, blood bath matchups at the start of the sport gave MMA a repulsive reputation.

But in 2009, the Association of Boxing Commission created the "Unified Rules of MMA," which outlawed the barbaric moves, like hair pulling or stomping on a fighter while he is on the ground. This cleaned up the sport making it easier for viewers to watch and become fans.

Women's MMA debuted in the mid-1990s in Japan stemming from professional wrestling and kickboxing. The mid-2000's brought some exposure for female fighters.

Female competition had major exposure in the mid-2000's from promotions such as Strikeforce, Bellator Fighting Championship and EliteXC. Invicta FC, created in 2012, is an all female promotion, which now airs on the UFC's streaming network.

Gina Carano was in the forefront of bringing women's MMA to the limelight. She appeared in numerous EliteXC matches. She fought in the first female main event for the first Strikeforce Women's Lightweight Championship (145 pounds) and lost to Cris "Cyborg" Santos.

Dana White, president of the UFC, was quoted once saying he would never allow female fighters into the UFC. His tune changed in 2011 by signing former Strikeforce Women's Bantamweight Champion, Ronda Rousey, in 2011.

Rousey became the first female to fight in the UFC in 2013 against Liz Carmouche for the Women's Bantamweight Championship. She defeated her in the first round via arm-bar submission.

Toward the end of 2013, White further went back on his word and introduced the Strawweight (115 pound) division. Carla Esparza was the first Strawweight Champion.

### **Promotion Prowess**

Promoting professional boxing is a business driven almost completely by money. Financial inequality is rampant within the sport. According to a report from Forbes in June, Floyd Mayweather raked in \$106 million over a 12-month period between 2013-14

Most male boxers never see this kind of payoff, nor go pro for that matter. However, the path to the apex is clearer in the male game than the female game

because of the existence of big time fighters who contenders can work their way up to facing. Beating a Mayweather or a Pacquiao is easier said than done, but doing so means boxing stardom. Even losing fights of that level mean big money.

“The Mayweather Pacquiao fight drew, what, multi millions of dollars [it] shocked me. I didn’t think that was possible but if you promote it properly, it can be done,” said Pete Spanakos, an amateur fighter from the 1960’s who fought alongside Ali at the 1959 Pan Am Games.

Joe DeGuardia, the President and CEO of Star Boxing, has been around boxing for nearly half a century. He coached fighters after his retirement from boxing and founded Star Boxing Promotion in 1992, just before the boom of women’s boxing. DeGuardia’s perspective, similar to Spanakos, is that women’s boxing lacks high profile targets.

“When it comes to the value of a fight, it’s all about what the fighters bring to the table. Do they generate rating for the TV networks? Do they generate sales for the venue? It’s very similar to male boxing,” DeGuardia said. “Getting into the ring with someone of notoriety and winning can do great things for one’s career, but there are less marquee fights out there for women to have, and that makes the climb to stardom more difficult.”

On the MMA, there are elite contenders such as Rousey and Holm, that bring notoriety to the sport but the UFC, the biggest MMA promotion, still has a hard time promoting female fights.

Since 2013, eight female fights have been the main event of a card out of 115 events. Six fights feature Rousey. About half of those had male main events, but were cancelled due to injury. This includes PPVs, Fight Nights on FOX and Fight Nights on UFC’s streaming network.

Most of the promotional tours were geared toward the male main events. Co-main event fighters aren’t mandated to attend all the events or be in the spotlight as often as the main eventers.

Rousey is a constant figure in the spotlight because of commercials and movie deals. Not every female fighter has that endorsement.

“Everyone got interested in women’s MMA because of Ronda Rousey. She was such a star,” said Sarah Thomas, an amateur MMA fighter and boxer in New York. “If they can find a girl and market her a certain way where people can get interested, that would be cool.”

Perhaps Strawweight champion Joanna Jedrzejczyk can be that new marketed female. If the UFC puts it’s effort into promoting women’s fights as they do for the men events, both divisions could have huge success.

“I think that men generally make more than women in fighting and I think that sucks but the only thing I can understand is if they’re making more money as far as PPVs and selling out crowd. It’s fair in that sense,” said Thomas. “I think [men] are marketed more so they bring in a bigger crowd and then make money.”

## **Lopsided Loot**

The price inequality among boxers is jarring within the male ranks and as well as male to female. The same can be said within the MMA community.

Sonya Lamonakis became the first woman to capture the Women’s Heavyweight International Boxing Organization world championship. When she captured that belt in 2013, she was paid \$3,000. Lamonakis, who is also an eighth grade teacher in Brooklyn, says that she’s made some side money off of boxing, but success in the sport doesn’t equal a viable source of income for women.

“Before my championship fight, for which we sold 10,000 tickets, I negotiated \$2,000 for the fight and 15% of the ticket sales. I could do that because I came in with a reputation,” Lamonikas said. “I wasn’t going to come in there and get hustled, but that’s the position that many female fighters are in.”

Lamonikas is one of the lucky ones. She isn’t quite Holly Holm, who used to box four times a year in New Mexico on her promoter’s card for \$25k a fight, but she is definitely more fortunate than most female boxers.

However, even from her fairly high perch, women’s boxing is not a sustainable way to make a living for women.

“Making boxing a fulltime thing, as a woman, is very difficult financially. You have to be here for the love of the sport, or have something else other than money driving you,” Lamonikas said. “There is money to be made. I drive a nice car, I have a nice condo; I’ve made money on the side of boxing. We aren’t fighting for peanuts, nor are we fighting to be millionaires.”

The UFC, along with certain athletic commissions, aren’t mandated to reveal fighters salaries. Unless contracts are redesigned and resigned, fighters will receive the same base salary, or “show money” for each fight.

Some UFC fighters receive money from PPV buy revenue, if they main event a card, and through bonuses, like “Fight of the Night” worth \$50,000. Sponsors and endorsements are also another way fighters maintain a revenue flow.

Along the lines of just base pay, Cat Zingano is the highest paid female MMA fighter bringing in \$100,000 for showing up. Rousey is next with \$75,000, as of December 2015.

If we add up endorsements, PPV buy revenues and other money streams, Rousey is the highest paid female MMA fighter bringing in a total of \$3 million in fight purses and \$3.5 million in endorsements. She was number eight on the Forbes Highest Paid Female Athletes list.

UFC 184 in February earlier this year, saw Rousey defeat Cat Zingano via straight armbar in 14 seconds. Her fight purse totaled \$130,000 with \$65,000 being “win” money. She also won Performance of the Night, which is an additional \$50,000.

Jake Ellenberger, 12<sup>th</sup> ranked welterweight, totaled \$136,000 with \$68,000 being “win” money. He also won Performance of the Night defeating Josh Koscheck via north-south choke.

Who is Jake Ellenberger?

12<sup>th</sup> ranked welterweight. A staked division with Robbie Lawlor on top. The pay difference isn't breaking Rousey's pocket, considering this isn't close to what she is making as far as movie deals and endorsements, but it is interesting to point out that there is a pay difference, even amongst athletes who aren't performing the same way Rousey is.

Female athletes across all sports sometimes receive less pay than their male counterparts. One way to fix the issue is for fans to participate in more female sports. Go to events or buy PPVs.

## **Well-being Woes**

From a health standpoint, some of the perils that female boxers face against each other in the ring are similar to what their male counterparts face, but there are stark differences as well.

A study by the Southern medical Association that compares the injuries of male and female boxers found that while the injury rate in professional boxing matches is high for both genders, male boxers do face a higher risk of injury than female boxers.

The study found that superficial facial lacerations are the most common injury reported on the women's side, but male boxers have a higher rate of knockout and technical knockouts and thus are theoretically at a higher risk of long-term disability from neurologic injury.

This rings true for MMA fighters. Any physical altercation is rough on a person's body but female MMA fighters have more to worry about besides the normal wear and tear.

“I think the biggest problem as a female is when I weight cut I have to worry about that time of the month and if I drop to low I could lose my period and then that’s kind of scary,” said Thomas.

According to Nick Beatty, DO, who has been a USA Boxing medic for two years, the biggest health related differences between men and women’s boxing actually lie outside of the ring in the fighter’s preparation, especially when it comes to weight-cutting.

“Danger of head injury is prevalent in both genders, but rapid weight shedding and gaining and the training and fighting has more of an effect on the female body than the male, simply because men are physically stronger,” Beatty said. “That’s not to be discriminatory, it’s just fact.”

Weight-cutting is an issue both male and females face, but the effects female face endanger the body in the long run.

“Anytime you have weight classes there are always issues of weight cutting,” Beatty said. “So you check on those things, if they are eating right, still having their periods, if their bone density is normal. You just want to be very careful and pay attention to the way your body is reacting to what you’re trying to get it to do.”

Nutritionist, managers and fighters should be paying attention to the signs of the female athlete triad, a syndrome involving eating disorders, loss of menstruation and decreased bone mineral density.

According to Dr. Marci Goolsby, a physician at the Women’s Sports Medicine Center in Manhattan, the body starts to suffer from an imbalance hormone system.

If a female athlete, mainly those in sports where weight-cutting or heavy weight maintenance is involved like swimming, gymnastics, or fighting, exhibits any of those traits, chances are they will start to exhibit the other traits, said Dr. Goolsby.

The problem is that the energy the body is receiving through eating and drinking is less than the energy the body is using performing the specific sport. The solution is to add more calories to their diet or decrease their performance per their diet.

The syndrome can lead to hair loss, osteoporosis and anemia. The disorder also leads to decreased healing time if bones are broken or fractured.

“One of the biggest things is asking the athlete, are you in the right [weight class]. If you are having to do extreme things to get down to the next level you might be

better off health wise and performance wise not going [to that weight],” said Dr. Goolsby

The problem spans across all combat sports within both genders. Both boxing and MMA promotions have taken precautions in allowing fighters to complete the weight cut safely.

### **Promising Potential**

Boxing is one of the world’s oldest sports, but organized woman’s boxing is only in its second full decade of operation. It’s a young variation of a longstanding sport trying to find its foothold in a landscape dominated by men.

The same can’t really be said for MMA. The women’s division is on the rise with talks of another women’s weight class in the UFC. The Strawweight division is bringing the company equal success as the Women’s Bantamweight division did.

However, female boxers aren’t to be counted out. Their continued inclusion in the Olympics will only attract more women worldwide to boxing.

“Right now, there is a huge difference between being a professional female boxer and being able to fight as one. There just aren’t enough fights,” Lamonikas said. “That’s the biggest hurdle is making our sport more financially lucrative.”

If the development of the amateur ranks leads to more skilled boxers and if female boxer learn to market themselves more, DeGuardia thinks that will result in the first true star of this era of women’s boxing.

“Beating the (wo)man doesn’t make you the (wo)man. It helps, but you need to be more than just a skilled fighter to be a star. You need something else, whether it’s looks, education, a personality; you need something else to draw the fans to you,” said DeGaurdia.

On the MMA side, stars like Rousey and Holm are already making a name for themselves They brought in over a million PPV buys coming in second in the UFC highest buy list.

“This whole women’s power movement that’s going on right now is crazy,” said White to Yahoo Sports. “It’s the best decision I’ve ever made.”

Fans of both sports need not worry. It seems that women are here to stay, even though they continue to overcome pay disparity rates and lack of proper promotion.

Brian Michelino, Thomas’s Jiu-Jitsu coach believes that both women’s MMA and boxing have the potential to be high-ranking events. Whether it is boxing or

MMA, as a fan and practitioner, he says that anyone who thinks female combat sports is going somewhere is wrong.

“I love watching women [fight]. Anytime I can see the technique shine through. I like that,” said Michelino. “Some of these girls are really badass. I think it’s positive for the sport that there’s going to be a lot more woman competitors.”