

Women in boxing

With the BBC screening women's boxing matches live for the first time and the London 2012 Olympics allowing the world's top female fighters to compete across three weight classes – flyweight, lightweight and middleweight – it seems this unfairly maligned sport is slowly getting the recognition it's been, well, fighting for.

Gold medal hopes including Ireland's Katie Taylor and Brits Natasha Jones and Savannah Marshall are standing on the metaphorical shoulders of Jane Couch, MBE (pictured), who in 1998 won the first professional women's boxing bout in Britain after launching a successful sexual discrimination claim against the British Boxing Board.



While the likes of old-school boxing promoter Frank Warren and world light-welterweight champion Amir Khan remain firmly against the idea of ladies who punch ('If women start getting seriously hurt and

bloodied it will reflect badly on the sport as a whole,' says Khan), women's boxing is booming.

Many women start competing after taking up boxing for fitness and discovering they have a mean left hook. Today more than 120 national boxing federations across the world have registered women competing in amateur bouts. The Amateur Boxing Association of England has issued licenses to around 650 female boxers. With fewer rounds (four three-minute bouts are usual) and protective gear including headguards, breast plates and bigger gloves, amateur women's boxing is more a game of tactical skill than a matter of simply punching each other's lights out.

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Fancy a fight

Fight night: Far from the razzmatazz of big-money bouts in Las Vegas, amateur kickboxer **JANE CORNWELL** visits one of Britain's backstreet nightclubs, which are becoming a haven for white-collar fight clubs

Bam! Stuart Lawson whips around and plants a spinning back fist on the side of Ryan 'The Hammer' Hamer's head. Kapow! A lightning-fast low roundhouse kick knocks The Hammer sideways. Lawson ducks a retaliatory left jab with practised ease then adds insult to injury with a spot of flamboyant bodypopping.

The crowd scream encouragement as the wiry, tattooed kickboxer throws in more spins and sweeps, more breathtaking combinations, to take another round in this spectacular title fight.

While the competitors retreat to their corners, a lissome lady in bra and hot pants parades around the boxing ring, holding a sign with Round 3 on it high above her head (far right). 'Well done,' says a spectator, clapping ironically as several 100 pairs of eyes fix on her scantily clad bottom, duplicated on a giant screen at the back of the cavernous venue.

A ding from the bell and a referee wearing surgical gloves restarts the fight. 'Keep your guard up!' someone yells at The Hammer, who is looking decidedly peaky. Lawson is just too good: when the final bell goes, the ref's decision is a given.

Welcome to Swagger, an evening of mixed martial arts (MMA) staged in a nightclub near London Bridge. While fight nights have long taken place all over

Britain under the aegis of bodies such as Wako (World Amateur Kickboxing Organisation) and Iska (International Sport Kickboxing Association), until I took up kickboxing I never dreamed I'd be attending one. Neither, perhaps, did many of the men and women buying a drink at the bar, taking their seats on plastic chairs and standing elbow-to-elbow around the ring. But inspired by gym self-defence classes and the rise in popularity of white-collar boxing – city boys with gloves on – everyone from secretaries to bankers is enjoying evenings of pugilistic entertainment.

Swagger is the brainchild of promoter and ex-boxer Freddie Osei, a British Ghanaian who once fought Katie Price's bent-nosed beau, Alex Reid. So did he beat him? 'What do you think? Of course I did.'

Osei runs three or four such nights a year. It's a big operation: there's the referee, the judges from Iska and the numbers girls to book. 'I'd booked a numbers guy, too, a male model, but he didn't show,' says Osei. A doctor has to OK each fighter before they get in the ring and an MC – the mustachioed, 1970s-besuited Charlie White – has to announce them.

Then there are the fighters. 'I'm trying to get the best fights, regardless of whether it's boxing, Thai boxing, kickboxing or white-collar fighting,'