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# NAVIGATING THE ROCKY ROAD: ELITE FEMALE BOXERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR BOXING JOURNEY

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## ABSTRACT

Given the scarcity of psychological research examining female participation in boxing, the present study sought to provide a bottom-up perspective of female amateur boxers' experiences of the challenges of competing and the strategies employed to overcome them. This study also aimed to provide specific policy recommendations to facilitate developmental opportunities for female boxers. To achieve these aims, phenomenological interviews were conducted with eight elite British female amateur boxers examining the early, middle and later years of their careers. Following an inductive content analysis, the findings revealed that the boxers experienced similar challenges and employed various strategies to deal with these barriers. Explicit policy recommendations have been provided, such as the provision of a women's boxing programme at the elite level and an increase in media promotion of women's boxing, which may help governing bodies to support female amateur boxers. Future research examining the perceptions of those who support the boxers (i.e., coaches, parents and sport science/medicine support practitioners) would provide a more holistic evaluation of female boxers' lived experiences and help to articulate how best to support them throughout their careers.

Sportswomen in the new millennium are breaking the physical restrictions of the past and reconstructing new, established cultural stands and sporting identities, while changing the perception of male dominated sports [Hargreaves 1994]. Although women now engage and compete in physically intense and aggressive sports such as rugby [Chase 2006], judo [Kavoura, Ryba and Chroni 2015], boxing and weightlifting [Pfister 2010], the occurrence of these forms of sporting involvement appears to run counterintuitive to traditionally accepted societal norms [Ming et al. 2016; Tjønndal 2019a]. Within the field of sport psychology, relatively little attention has been paid to the study of female participation within boxing as a combat sport [Godoy-Pressland 2016].

Despite some positive experiences, female athletes across a range of sports may face gender specific challenges such as sexualised representation in the media [Kane, LaVoi and Fink 2013] and menstrual dysfunction [Marquez and Molinero 2013]. For instance, Paul's [2015] study explored female athletes' experiences of competing and training in roller derby, mixed martial arts (MMA) and rugby. The MMA fighters highlighted the difficulty of participation due to sexualising and infantilising expressions and opinions held by the public, as well as not being taken seriously by coaches. In line with these challenges, previous studies exploring martial arts and combat sports have revealed that female athletes identified numerous challenges such as gender stereotypes [Harlbert, 1997; Young 1997] and stigmatisation [Shilling and Bunsell 2009] related to their involvement in a male dominated sport. As a result of such challenges, some female athletes have struggled to maintain an equilibrium between a 'sporting' and a 'feminine' body [Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar and Kauer 2004] and between an athlete's and a woman's identity [Harlbert 1997; Kavoura et al 2015].

For women, emphasised femininity refers to various cultural and social expectations which encourage women to exhibit characteristics such as fragility and dependency [Schippers 2007]. Thus, a niche for female athletes exists in sports demanding 'feminine' qualities such as grace and flexibility. Although not evident in all studies [Macro, Viveiros and Cipriano 2009], if a female athlete portrays a serious commitment to sport she may place her feminine status at risk [Krane 2001: 177]. As an example, Spencer, Rehman and Kirk's [2015: 6] review on gender norms and its relation to health-related behaviours in 10–19 year-old females revealed that participants enjoyed the experience of physical activity (PA) since participation enhanced their self-esteem and provided a creative outlet. However, many girls experience complex relationships with PA as they feel pressurised to appear feminine [Evans 2006]. Consequently, young girls' participation in PA is often affected by gender norms and feminine ideologies [Spencer et al. 2015], thus resulting in reduced participation in sports and other PA.

In spite of gender stereotypes and various barriers, female athletes around the world have challenged the system, acted against societal norms, and created new concepts of womanhood through participation in male dominated sports [Knapp 2014]. Levy's [2002: 120] qualitative research focusing on the personal meaning of competition for nine female mountain bike racers indicated that it is a way of self-discovery, self-acceptance and a source of empowerment, enabling women to break the gender stereotype and serve as a role model for other females. Moreover, Ming et al. [2016: 38] explored how twelve female athletes experienced, interpreted, accepted, tolerated and resisted the contradictory role adopted through participation in power and performance sports such as rugby, boxing and MMA, with findings demonstrating that participants enjoyed the physical intensity and mental strength associated with these sports. In combat sports more widely, sex-integration has been investigated [Channon 2014], in addition to the gendered significance of women's participation in combat sports [Channon and Phipps 2017] and women's participation in mixed martial arts in Norway and Sweden [Alsarve and Tjønndal 2019], to name just a few.

Boxing is defined as an individual sport whereby the direct aim of each boxer is to land punches on the target areas of the opposition [Lane 2008]. Although female participation in boxing is banned in some countries (e.g., Islamic Republic of Iran), other cultures have embraced and accepted the involvement of females in boxing. The conditions of female participation in boxing and sport generally, may vary considerably by culture [Turpeinen, Jaako, Kankaanpää and Hakamäki 2012]. For example, boxing in Canada has one of the most varied athletic populations in terms of nationality, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, educational status, sexual preference, language, and immigrant status [Schinke, Stambulova, Trepanier and Odirin 2015]. Boxers are often attracted to the sport as a way of achieving a 'better life' on various sociocultural levels, with some having experienced ongoing forms of identity marginalisation [Schinke et al 2015]. Furthermore, female participation in boxing in the United Kingdom (UK) has been on the rise since the inclusion of female boxing in the 2012 Olympics. The Great Britain (GB) Boxing Association reported that the 2012 Olympics inspired a surge in female boxing with numbers increasing by 50% from 23,300 (October 2011–October 2012) to 35,100 (April 2012–April 2013), with 18.5% of all participants in boxing being females [Great Britain Boxing n.d.].

Despite this increase, stereotypes about what is socially acceptable have influenced how female athletes are perceived [Ross and Shinew 2008: 50]. With this point in mind, Jackson and Marsh [1986: 198] suggested that qualities such as physical strength, competitiveness, determination, aggressiveness and tough-mindedness are considered to be masculine;

however, these are necessary to be a successful athlete in many sports, irrespective of gender. Regardless, these are traits frequently associated with hegemonic masculinity, an institutionally privileged and dominant masculinity for men. Coakley [2009] therefore implied that males tend to participate in power and performance sports which require these traditionally masculine qualities.

Specific to boxing, the majority of sport psychology research has tended to focus on men's experiences, examining training practices and weight reduction leading up to a fight [Simpson and Wisberg 2013; Morton, Robertson, Sutton and MacLaren 2010], boxers' progressions through the 2013–2016 Olympic cycle [Schinke, Stambulova, Trepanier and Oghene 2015], as well as performance analysis [Davis, Benson, Pitty, Connorton and Waldock 2015]. More recently, Bonhomme, Seanor, Schinke and Stambulova [2018] examined the career development of two male world champion boxers, and identified five developmental stages of amateur to professional boxing, namely: (1) weathering the hardships of early life, (2) entry into sport, (3) amateur experience, (4) launching a professional career, and (5) capturing a world title. However, such experiences and career development studies have rarely been examined from a female boxer's perspective and thus our understanding of the female boxer remains incomplete.

Regarding female boxing more broadly, this is an emerging (but still limited) research area. Previous studies have explored the challenges women have faced in professional boxing [Halbert 1997], female boxers' experiences of gender construction [Carlsson 2017], and their reduced opportunities and disadvantages [Cove and Young 2007] compared to their male counterparts. More recently, Tjønndal [2019a] explored the lived experiences of coaches and athletes in Norwegian Olympic boxing, as well as the innovation, inclusion and exclusion in women's Olympic boxing [Tjønndal 2019b]. Despite these valuable studies, from a sport psychology perspective, our understanding of the challenges female boxers face as well as strategies they have found effective in dealing with challenges across their sporting life span is limited. McGannon, Schinke, Ge and Blodgett [2018] investigated a related field in exploring women's identities in relation to inclusion and marginalisation in the Canadian National Boxing Team; however, the primary focus of their study was not in identifying the key strategies and challenges faced. Further to this, Schinke et al. [2019] explored sociocultural identity challenges presented by the Canadian National Team Female Boxers and provided specific intervention strategies to build up a culturally inclusive environment for the athletes. Nevertheless, the challenges were specific to identity only.

Further examination of female athletes' experiences in sports is warranted, specifically on the barriers experienced by female boxers in different geographical areas around the world [Tjønndal 2019a]. This would also improve our understanding of ensuring equal participation for men and women in boxing globally [Tjønndal 2019b: 143]. Within the last decade female boxing in Britain has increased with the help of boxing clubs and coaches [England Boxing n.d.], as well as the boxers taking initiative to help themselves progress. This rise reflects a changing climate towards the acceptance of female participation in amateur boxing, which this study seeks to more fully understand by examining the experiences of eight elite female amateur boxers. Such understanding may also lead to specific policy recommendations for improved opportunities for female amateur boxers. Using qualitative research and an epistemological and methodological approach used in many boxing studies [Tjønndal 2019a; Tjønndal 2019b], the aim of this research will be to investigate this phenomenon from a sport psychology standpoint to firstly acknowledge the challenges female elite amateur boxers face, then provide beneficial strategies which boxers and combat sports athletes may choose to utilise to deal with challenges and help enhance their performance. Lastly, this study intends to outline policy recommendations to facilitate developmental opportunities for female amateur boxers. This unique focus will provide coaches, support staff, parents and female athletes with valuable knowledge to inform how best to approach the sport, deal with the various inevitable challenges and reach their full potential.

## **METHODS**

### ***Participants***

Eight elite female amateur boxers (age range = 22–37 years;  $M_{\text{age}} = 30.3$ ,  $SD = 5.1$ ) from the current and previous (retired boxers) England and GB boxing team consented to participate in the study. The boxers' careers ranged from three to 28 years ( $M_{\text{experience}} = 6.5$  years), and 17 to 78 competitive bouts (fights;  $M_{\text{fights}} = 34.4$ ). Demographic information is provided in Table 1 overleaf. Individuals competed between the weight categories of 51 kilograms to 69 kilograms, with two athletes selected for the Olympic games.

### ***Phenomenological Interviews***

Empirical phenomenology was chosen in the present study to create rich, detailed accounts of boxers' lived experiences in each domain [Allen-Collinson 2011]. Phenomenological interviews enable the collection of in-depth and expressive information, exploring the

experiences of participants [Allen-Collinson 2011] and draws a holistic understanding of the phenomenon. While other qualitative and quantitative approaches seek to understand *how* or *why* a phenomenon occurs, empirical phenomenology describes *what* participants experience [Nesti 2004], via the exploration of their thoughts and feelings. Due to the nature of phenomenological interviews, the conversation between the researcher and participant tends to be open and conversational, thus allowing the freedom to explore evolving concepts, rather than being limited by a strict schedule [Potter and Hepburn 2005]. As suggested by Sparkes and Smith [2014], the researcher must establish rapport and empathy, when appropriate, in order to build trusting relationships with participants, yet remain mindful of over-*rapport* and over-*looking* issues that need to be problematised. Following Sparkes and Smith's [2014] recommendations, semi-structured interviews were conducted by the first author to allow the boxers to discuss their experiences in totality [Giorgi and Giorgi 2003]. As a result of the researcher's sporting background as a female amateur boxer, she was able to relate and empathise with some of the mentioned challenges during each interview.

### **Materials**

Ethical approval was gained from the Institutional Ethics committee of the first author. Thereafter, pilot interviews were conducted to ensure the appropriateness, feasibility and suitability of the interview questions in helping to answer the study aims [Van Teijlingen & Hundley 2002]. The 'interview schedule'<sup>1</sup> was carefully developed to allow each participant to freely discuss and elaborate on their experiences of boxing, in training and competitions. Drawing upon Connaughton, Hanton and Jones's [2010] four specific career phases of elite athletes and approaches adopted by Giacobbi et al. [2004], the interview schedule was split into four sections beginning with an introduction to familiarise the participants with the nature and confidentiality of the study followed by an examination of the challenges experienced during the early (second section), middle (third section) and later years (fourth section) of boxers' careers. As each career phase was discussed, the strategies that each boxer employed were also discussed. The early (novice) years referred to the start of the participant's boxing career and their experience of competing in their first bout. The middle (developmental) years referred to the participant's experience of gaining competition experience beyond the first competitive bout, whilst the later (elite) years referred to boxers' experience of competing in national and international competitions and typically competing in 15 or more bouts.

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1. The schedule is available from the first author on request  
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### **Procedures**

The participants were recruited from various Amateur Boxing Association (ABA) registered boxing gyms around the UK through personal contacts with the directors of the England team. Participants had to be over the age of 18 years old and had previous or current experience of competing for the England or the GB squad. The researcher contacted each participant via an invitation email providing them with a detailed information briefing sheet and inviting them to participate. Eight out of 11 elite female boxers responded to the invitation email. All participants were assured of the confidentiality of their interviews and notified that they could withdraw themselves or their transcript at any point. Once informed consent was obtained, the first author organised a suitable time and place to conduct the interview. Due to the geographical location of each participant, five of the interviews were conducted via Skype. Following Hanna's [2012: 240] recommendations, an upgraded version of Skype was used to allow enhanced visual and audio interaction between the participant and researcher. A brief introduction from the researcher helped in familiarising the boxer with the nature and purpose of the study. Following this briefing, interviews were conducted, and audio recorded using a dictaphone, lasting an average of 72 minutes (range: 37 to 108 minutes). Once the interviews were completed, the participants were debriefed and re-informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

### **Data Analysis**

In line with previous work [Didymus 2017; Phillippi and Lauderdale 2018], all interviews were transcribed verbatim including pauses, addition of line and page numbers and field notes to record the emotional responses and body language of participants. All transcripts were anonymised by changing participants' names to pseudonyms.

As recommended by previous research [Giorgi and Giorgi 2008], each interview was separately inductively content analysed using an iterative process to identify meaning units (i.e., words, phrases, sentences or paragraphs [Weston, Thelwell, Bond and Hutchings 2009]) relating first to the challenges experienced by each participant, and second as to the strategies employed by each participant to overcome such challenges. The challenges and employed strategies were analysed separately for the early, middle and later years of boxers' boxing lifecycle. In agreement with previous research [Alexander et al. 2016], the researcher highlighted portions of raw text which illustrated various challenges and employed strategies, and took note of prominent concepts within each transcript. This process was then repeated for the early, middle and later years. Each phase was allocated with a specific highlighted colour,

consequently all transcripts were logically divided up into categories relating to the specific challenges and strategies that were presented across all interviews.

Drawing on the procedures adopted in previous research [Ming et al. 2016], the final stages of the analysis involved content analysis procedures to identify first order themes as to the challenges experienced and employed strategies of the competing female boxers. In accord with the aims of the study, the challenges voiced by the participants and the employed strategies were identified for each boxing phase (i.e., early, middle and later years).

To ensure reliability and avoid bias, two other trained researchers worked in isolation to independently code the data without negotiation [Smith and McGannon 2017]. Thereafter, the triangulation procedure enabled all researchers to compare codes and discuss any inconsistencies. Subsequently, the first author utilised member checking as a way of involving the participants to assess the trustworthiness of the findings and thus validate the credibility of the results. In practice, this involved all transcribed interviews and results (i.e., themes) being provided to the participants who were then asked to reflect upon the analysis of their commentary [Smith and McGannon 2017]. All participants confirmed they were satisfied with the accuracy of analysis.

Name (Pseudonym)	Age (years; time of interview)	Number of bouts	Career length (years)
Hannah	33	46	8
Hayley	30	25	4
Gemma	34	40	8
Amy	25	20	13
Sarah	28	17	5
Zoe	22	19	5
Lauren	33	33	10
Georgie	37	78	7

Table 1:  
Participant's Demographic Information

## RESULTS

The boxer's responses identified 94 raw data challenges in the early years, which were categorised into 13 first order themes, five second order themes and two general dimensions. Likewise, the employed strategies for the early years collated 43 raw data strategies, seven first order themes, three second order themes, three general dimensions and five strategy themes in total. Responses for the middle years gathered 70 raw data challenges, nine first order themes, six second order themes and two general dimensions. The corresponding middle years employed strategies assembled 39 raw data strategies, five first order themes, three second order themes, two general dimensions and five strategy themes in total. Lastly, the later years revealed 98 raw data challenges, nine first order themes, five second order themes and two general dimensions with 42 raw data strategies, five first order themes, four second order themes, two general dimensions and five strategy themes in total. Table 2 illustrates the strategies that were employed to overcome the specific challenges experienced in each phase of the participant's boxing lifecycle. The results are presented in line with the approach adopted by Connaughton et al. [2010] and Didymus [2017].

### Challenges and Employed Strategies in the Early Years

#### Difficulties of competing as a female boxer.

The difficulty of competing as a female boxer was a mutual challenge experienced by all athletes in the early years. All interviews alluded to the preconception of female boxers, for instance, the comments and judgements made by friends, boxing fans and coaches. Boxers described comments made by others to be degrading and at times demotivating, with Hayley and Lauren stating: 'It wasn't appropriate for women to be there [boxing gyms]', 'I think it [female boxing] still isn't easy for people to comprehend and accept'. It was within this theme too that the athletes expressed the commonality of experiencing stereotypical, racist and sexist comments about their choice to compete in boxing. Gemma expressed her frustration about other peoples' assumptions of her sexuality based on the sport she participated in: 'I get annoyed when people assume my sexuality because of the sport I participate in and my pursuits, I don't care if they think I'm gay, I'm not but they just assume it'. Similarly, Amy described her experience of sexist comments at school due to her participation in boxing: 'I was so different to them [girls at school] they kept saying I was a boy and I wanted to be a boy'. In line with these challenges, several boxers mentioned the dislike of boxing within their family, where being a woman was construed as incompatible with being a boxer. Lauren noted: 'She [mother] was like it's about time you started acting like a girl, she obviously didn't like it [boxing]' and further expressed that her mother never supported her involvement or achievements in boxing.



Despite these barriers, the athletes were intent on pursuing their passion in boxing; the boxers emphasised how important it was to challenge negative comments and rephrase negative statements to positive actions such as training harder and proving people wrong. Georgie explained the difficulty of dealing with negative comments from her coach and fellow male boxers: 'I had to be determined and ignore everybody around me when they [coach and fellow male boxers] were being negative towards me', whilst Hannah depicted a similar struggle: 'After he [coach] told me I shouldn't be boxing, I was so determined to prove him wrong, if they [other male boxers] made any negative comments I just had to take it on the chin and prove them wrong'. Moreover, Gemma and Sarah explained: 'In the championships the only bouts that were covered were some of the female Olympic weight bouts and all the other male fights, that's not fair' and 'In the boxing magazines there were descriptions of the men's fights, yet nothing on the first ever female title fight, the media don't promote female boxers like male boxing'. The boxers expressed the need for media attention to promote and normalise female amateur boxing as a positive sport to engage in, potentially increasing acceptance of female boxing in wider society.

Some boxers depicted their early years' experience as having to prove themselves despite being ignored at various gyms, with Zoe quoting: '[Going into a gym] it's not comfortable, I mean you're not there to box you're there to prove yourself'. Gemma explained how disgraced she was at the language used during a training session: 'The language they [coaches] use in some gyms not swearing but saying to everyone to stop punching like you're a p\*\*\*\* or you did that press up like a little b\*\*\*\*, I've heard them things when I've been training and it's so rude and we're very accepting as a society in terms of jokes and derogatory comments towards women'.

#### **Lack of support from the governing body.**

Another challenge in the early years was the lack of will from the governing body to allow females to box. Gemma and Georgie described their frustration on the ban on female boxing during the very early years of their boxing careers: 'I couldn't compete because it was illegal for women to box, it wasn't fair', 'All I wanted was to compete but I couldn't get licenced'. As members of the England female squad, some of the participants described their anxiety at competing nationally and internationally as novice boxers (under three bouts) as no strict regulations were in place for female competitors, with Sarah describing her first experience at a national competition as disorganised. She further explained: 'During the championships when it came to our [female boxers] competition everyone started packing away, including the officials'. The athlete's disparity in competition experience in comparison to their foreign opponents resulted from a difficulty in

finding appropriate female sparring partners. Consequently, the females often sparred with heavier, elite male boxers to compensate for the lack of sparring and experience. That being said, some boxers indicated that they had received substantial support from their coaches and teammates, where some coaches would organise periodised training to suit their boxers' ability. Zoe noted: 'I had the support of my coach when others didn't believe in me, you have to develop that trust with your coach', whilst Amy discussed the encouragement of her teammates: 'I don't have the support of my biological family in boxing but I've got the support of my boxing family in the gym'.

#### **Challenges and Employed Strategies in the Middle Years**

##### **Lack of support and opportunity for female boxers.**

Although the boxers acknowledged the difficulties of competing as a female amateur boxer, many struggled to get noticed in boxing due to limited opportunities and promotion of female amateur boxing. Most boxers stressed the potential health problems associated with limited (51kg, 60kg and 75kg) weight categories at the elite/Olympic level, particularly for the younger generation: 'There are three weight categories for females in comparison to men and I think that really encourages unhealthy practices for women because you have to fall into those three categories, especially with young girls coming through now and forcing themselves to fall within those three categories. You just think at your age you're going to start so many problems' (Georgie). The boxers felt extremely frustrated as non-Olympic weights were neglected, consequently competitive boxers had no goal to aim for if they did not qualify for the eligible weight categories, bearing in mind each category differed by 11 or more kilograms. The frustration also stemmed from the lack of equal opportunities for female boxers in comparison to their male counterparts; unlike female boxers, male boxers have the opportunity to compete at 10 weight categories with a difference of four kilograms between each category. Hannah stated: 'We [female boxers] just don't get the same amount of attention', whilst Hayley described the effect of the limited weight categories on boxers that qualified for non-Olympic weight categories: 'The governing body neglected the vast majority of women's boxing in the country, they don't focus on any other females that doesn't fall in the three Olympic weight categories'.

The boxers noted that representing their country in championships, nationally and internationally, was governed by self-funding and arranging time off work, with no support from the governing body, boxing clubs or sponsorships. In contrast male boxers who competed in championships or international competitions were typically supported by their club or a form of sponsorship. Under such circumstances the boxers emphasised the importance of focusing their time and efforts on

developing their boxing skills and training to the best of their ability. However, most female boxers did not have the opportunity to spar with females similar in weight and experience. Zoe described her experience of sparring with various male boxers, including professional boxers, to develop her speed and accuracy despite her sparring partners weighing 10 kilograms heavier than her, quoting: 'My sparring partner is bigger but he pushes me and everyone there sees the potential, sees what you've achieved. They want to help towards pushing you further'.

Lauren explained the sacrifice of neglecting her relationship and social life because of competitions and training, stating: 'My biggest struggle has been my relationship, it emasculated him [partner] a little. He was also just unhappy, he didn't get to see me and came to resent boxing for taking me away from him'. This suggests female boxers walk a tightrope between their social life and sport performance as well as dealing with sexist views of gender roles. For some boxers, participating in boxing negatively influenced their relationship and available social support. The importance of prioritising responsibilities was a common strategy which also led to scheduling training around family and social events. In turn, the boxers felt scheduling training times enabled them to create a balance between boxing, social life and commitment to relationships.

#### **Developing an unhealthy relationship with food.**

Considering the physical demands of training several times a day, the boxers explained the transition of training intensely and feeling more fatigued, with some boxers drastically altering their weight category, which proved to be another major challenge. Hayley quoted: 'I couldn't maintain the weight, I wasn't eating anything, not drinking much, mostly dehydrated', with Georgie echoing similar struggles: 'I lived on replacement shakes, it was pretty miserable'. These boxers eventually adhered to unhealthy weight maintenance strategies (i.e., starvation) due to the limited weight categories, with one boxer reducing her weight by six kilograms in six weeks so she could be considered for the GB team. Some boxers further elaborated on the limited weight categories and explained that weight reduction led to serious problems such as osteoporosis: 'I just couldn't deal with it [reducing weight], psychologically and physically I just couldn't maintain the weight' (Georgie), with Hannah and Gemma describing the detrimental effects: 'Osteoporosis had kicked in and I adapted to disordered eating. I just had to withdraw myself from training', 'Things [reproductive system] started to go pretty wrong'. Previous research has found that persistent attention directed to body mass control increases the possibility of eating disorders (e.g. anorexia, bulimia) with higher risk among female athletes [Coelho, Gomes, Ribeiro and Soares 2014]. In addition to this, regular participation in strenuous physical exercise can affect reproductive function and lead to menstrual disturbances within female

athletes [Franchini, Brito and Artioli 2012]. Consequently, as a way to deal with drastic weight loss, the boxers discussed the significance of alternating their diet gradually and carefully to achieve a certain weight. Additionally, modifying training so that exercises were boxing specific (i.e., three-minute rounds, shadow boxing) was also an employed strategy to enhance their skills as well as aid their weight loss.

#### **Challenges and Employed Strategies in the Later Years**

Several challenges experienced in the middle years followed through into the later years such as lack of support and organisational issues.

#### **Dealing with female specific challenges.**

Regular training over long periods of time resulted in positive improvements in strength, however this was countered by the increased difficulty to then meet the weight limit for competitive bouts. Most boxers noted the challenge of reducing weight during their menstrual cycle, since their weight would generally fluctuate between two to three kilograms, with Hannah and Sarah quoting: 'When I'm on [menstrual cycle] my weight fluctuates a few kilos and I'm not able to drink much', 'Being on your period really effects your weight'. Reducing bodyweight during a menstrual cycle was a monthly struggle for most boxers and more generally, a challenge very specific to female athletes who compete in weight regulated sports. The boxers suggested various strategies to monitor their weight. Interestingly, all athletes were aware of inappropriate and harmful techniques they employed during their earlier years and acknowledged that such techniques were not effective in the long term: 'I'm not stupid with my diet anymore!' (Amy), 'I eat something healthy and take protein supplements after training now which help with recovery instead of leaving the gym starving' (Lauren). With the help of their coach, nutritionist or a personal trainer, the athletes structured their training to bespoke boxing specific workouts to optimise their performance and help maintain weight during their menstrual cycle, with Zoe and Hayley explaining: 'Me and my coach created a periodisation for training', 'I met with the nutritionist at GB boxing'. However, even at the elite level not all boxers had access to expert support and were therefore unable to gain sufficient advice.

The boxers discussed their continuous commitment to boxing and frequently travelling away on weekends to competitions and training camps. Lauren discussed the difficulty of maintaining a heterosexual relationship: 'There is a challenge in your relationship, he [partner] didn't know what he was letting himself in for, I was coaching and training three times a week. The roles were reversed, I was rarely at home'. Similarly, Amy elaborated on the lack of support from her family: 'I resorted in hiding all my boxing achievements as my family had never approved of my participation in boxing. I've got a traditional

family that think women shouldn't be in the ring'. The lack of support depicts the social struggle female boxers experience whilst pursuing their athletic careers. Traditional gender ideologies place females in nurturing roles whereas men hold the more masculine positions such as being assertive and powerful [Channon and Phipps 2017]. Deviating from these social norms may consequently lead to social disapproval from society, family members or even a romantic partner. Nonetheless, the boxers expressed their sense of pride in their accomplishments and attitude towards a socially unacceptable sport. Some boxers emphasised the importance of reframing to a positive mind-set as a valuable strategy, with Hannah and Sarah quoting: 'I have to keep moving up and keep learning, no matter what anyone says', 'I believe it's the CAN DO attitude, you have to think about the future'.

**Dissatisfaction at the elite level.**

Dissatisfaction at the elite level was noted as a current and continuing challenge in the later years of the boxer's career. Dissatisfaction refers to how the boxers felt once they had excelled in their career; consequently, reaching the peak was not what they had expected in terms of training and competing as an elite female boxer. A number of boxers discussed the lack of some coaches' readiness to train female boxers during the first ever GB female training camp, with Hannah and Gemma explaining: 'There was a lack of understanding about

female competition', 'You felt alone with some of the guidance they [coaches] were teaching, it didn't translate into women's boxing'. Feeling dissatisfied stemmed from the coach's attitude and reluctance towards female boxers, with Gemma stating: 'When we went away one of the coaches openly said he hates women's boxing, he doesn't think it's right and we thought brilliant you're responsible for us for the next week'. Moreover, the females explained that being set unrealistic goals, such as achieving the same benchmarks as the male boxers, and training monotonously every week discouraged them from training, as there was no sense of physiological progression or technical development: 'Coaches couldn't understand why the women couldn't run as fast as the men, they thought we were lazy or unfit because we couldn't keep up with the lads' (Georgie).

Some boxers expressed feeling frustrated in the sport since the female team were not assigned a well-established programme in comparison to their male counterparts: 'It took a very long time to integrate us [female boxers] into the GB program' (Hannah). Furthermore, the boxers referred to organisational issues, such as the limited weight categories, which restricted them from achieving future goals such as competing at the Olympics: 'There are less Olympic weight categories, less opportunities for us [female boxers]' (Amy). Although boxers expressed the gradual improvements of coaching techniques and training camps

Boxing phase (years)	Challenge dimensions	Strategy themes
Early/Novice	Difficulties of competing as a female boxer Lack of support from the governing body	Challenge negative comments Gain help from the media to raise attention Rephrase negative statements to positive actions Gain support from your coach Gain support from your team
Middle/Developmental	Lack of support and opportunity for female boxers Developing an unhealthy relationship with food	Train on your own Seek others to train with Focus on your potential Self-educate about nutrition Take control of your training
Later/Elite years	Dealing with female specific challenges	Reframe to a positive mind-set Access expert support Structure training
	Dissatisfaction at the elite level	Cancelling out negative thoughts Use club for support

Table 2:  
Experienced Challenges and their Associated  
Strategies in the Early, Middle and Later Years



since the first ever female team, the necessity for expert help for female boxers remains a contemporary challenge. Hayley discussed her journey of being excluded from the England team due to an injury and signified the lack of expert support for the England female boxers to enable her to return to boxing efficiently: 'It's difficult not having adequate support, we [female boxers] need access to expertise help, luckily I had my club to turn to for support'.

The boxers discussed cancelling out negative thoughts and using every opportunity to better themselves as boxers. For instance, the boxers acknowledged the vast progress in female boxing and appreciated the opportunity to represent England and GB internationally: 'Gaining more experience was so important despite the limited opportunities we [female boxers] had' (Sarah). The boxers emphasised the importance of enjoying the experience and the learning curve of boxing at the elite level, as female boxing is growing in opportunity and equality. With this in mind, the boxers were grateful for the experience, support, opportunities and accomplishments in their boxing career and highlighted the personal achievement of becoming mentally stronger and resilient during the course of their boxing lifecycle.

## DISCUSSION

The findings revealed that participants experienced unique challenges as female amateur boxers across their career stages. Although the boxers outlined specific issues relevant to the early, middle and later years, some commonalities were also apparent throughout. Firstly, a lack of support from others was a shared theme. As boxing has historically been considered a male-associated sport, perceptions that it does not align with a 'suitable' feminine identity were clearly apparent. In this study, it was revealed that these perceptions resulted in a struggle to be accepted and a lack of social support from others, most notably families, partners, friends and the media. Resentment for boxing within families derived from a disapproval of women competing in a sport known to be socially inappropriate for women [Channon and Jennings 2014], associated with certain forms of masculinity (e.g., strong, muscular, aggressive) and a sport which places females' femininity and gender under question [McGannon et al. 2018: 169]. To expand, some boxers discussed the dislike of boxing within their families where being a female boxer intersected with the boxer's femininity and physicality, a concept also highlighted within McGannon et al.'s [2018] study.

Furthermore, a dislike of boxing within a romantic heterosexual relationship portrays a juxtaposition of gender roles, whereby the male may feel de-masculinised and devalued as the alpha male within the

relationship due to the female's attachment to boxing [Channon and Phipps 2017]. However, the boxers discussed the strategy of reframing to a positive mind-set, a common strategy utilised more by female athletes, especially when the stressor appears to be beyond the athlete's control [Dias, Cruz and Fonseca 2010]. For some women, a lack of support also resulted in them rescheduling their training around social events to demonstrate commitment to their family and relationships in light of a reversal of traditional gender roles. Therefore, female boxers may find it difficult to negotiate and balance their different (and sometimes conflicting) identities and priorities.

Due to their participation and success in a traditionally 'masculine' sport, stereotypes surrounding female boxers' sexualities were also apparent. In line with Paul's [2015: 415] findings with female MMA athletes, the boxers in this study expressed their frustration at presumptions from friends, colleagues and boxing fans, amongst others. This was also evident in previous research [Halbert 1997] where boxers described the stereotypical assumptions of the general public and people within the boxing industry, assuming that female boxers are either manly or butch, lesbian, ugly, overweight or just different and strange. However, the present study's boxers along with Paul's [2015] MMA athletes and Halbert's [1997] boxers, adopted comparable strategies, such as being committed to training, not quitting and rephrasing negative statements to positive actions.

The findings from this study also revealed the boxer's awareness of the lack of media promotion, which created a sense of isolation, with female boxing considered socially unacceptable. In contrast, elite male boxers were promoted via various means of media such as boxing magazines and live coverage of competitions. The boxers explained that due to a lack of promotion and opportunity, the progression of female boxing was slow and not taken seriously in comparison to their male counterparts. The seriousness of female boxers has previously been identified as a common challenge [McGannon et al. 2018; Tjønndal 2019a] whereby boxers' femininity and even dress code may influence the public's perception about female boxing. Halbert's [1997] boxers also revealed that a lack of promotion and support by fans, promoters and managers was detrimental to their careers as women's boxing was not deemed important. Moreover, Marshall [2016] stated that sports media consistently ignores female athletes' accomplishments and treats them as second class citizens; thus, the lack of coverage on female sports has resulted in a sexist discourse in sports media. In agreement with Marshall [2016], Jakubowska, Channon and Matthews [2016: 417] found media coverage of a successful female MMA athlete was at times sexist, and dismissed her achievements because of her gender and the aggressive nature of MMA.

In light of the above problems, the athletes explained the importance of social support, in particular from their coaches. In agreement with previous research in sport and exercise psychology [Rees and Hardy, 2000], this study reflects the significance of receiving social support as way of overcoming particular challenges. Receiving emotional (turning to others for comfort and security), esteem (giving an individual positive feedback), informational (providing an individual with guidance), and tangible (instrumental assistance, in which a person in a stressful situation is given the necessary resources) [Cutrona and Russell 1990] support from coaches and the national governing body (alongside teammates and family) was crucial in enabling the boxers to continue with their boxing career.

Although some boxers praised their boxing families for the support provided to them, others were more critical, outlining a lack of support from coaches and the national governing body throughout their career stages. For some of this study's participants, issues with the national governing body resulted in difficulties receiving a boxing license, little regulation of female boxing, and few examples of the sport being prioritised in contrast to male boxing. As an example, one problem discussed was a lack of officials to referee female bouts during a national competition, resulting in uneven bouts and a disparity in competition experience in comparison to their foreign opponents.

Regarding coaching practices more specifically, a reluctance to train females, alongside a lack of understanding of female amateur boxing, resulted in some negative experiences for the participants. Some boxers outlined their experiences with sexist comments and stereotypical assumptions made by certain coaches, which led to feelings of disappointment and dissatisfaction, similar to Halbert's [1997] study where female boxers also depicted their experience of sex-based discrimination. Accepting female boxers as part of the GB team proved difficult and almost revolutionary for certain coaches; such intransigency demonstrates how key facilitators can express resistance to social inclusion of female athletes in elite sport. At the elite level, a lack of consistent access to expert support (for example when injured) was also outlined, suggesting female boxers and their needs may not be prioritised; therefore, a more well-established female boxing programme may be required.

Furthermore, some boxers described the difficulties of being the only female boxer at their respective gyms. For example, sparring and competitions for the female boxers was a rare opportunity as very little support was provided to organise such events. Despite this, some participants outlined positive experiences of having male sparring partners, as they were able to gain further respect and prove themselves, allowing others to see their potential. This aligns with Halbert's [1997]

study, where female boxers recognised the valuable emotional and physical (training with male boxers/coaches) support that some men provided, in essence helping their boxing development. Likewise, the female MMA athletes in Paul's [2015] study indicated that training with their male teammates proved their dedication and seriousness.

Finally, throughout some of their career stages, the development of an unhealthy relationship with food, and adopting extreme weight loss strategies due to the limited weight categories were common challenges. The boxers discussed the consequences of drastic weight loss (i.e., feeling low, lack of energy) and for some, the onset of disordered eating and osteoporosis. Boxers who adhered to rapid weight loss strategies were in extreme danger of developing traits of the female athlete triad, where female athletes experience an interrelationship of menstrual dysfunction, disordered eating and osteoporosis [Nazem and Ackerman 2012]. Experiencing menstrual cycle dysfunction and disordered eating are very common in females who compete in endurance or weight classified sports [Pasque 2009].

Reducing weight during the menstrual cycle also proved to be an issue. Although the female boxers struggled with this, they advised seeking expert help (e.g. nutritionist, personal trainer) as a useful strategy, since reducing weight via rapid weight loss strategies became detrimental in the long term. In support of this, Ko et al. [2017: 249] noted that female reproductive physiology and irregularity is affected by several conditions such as extreme weight loss and excessive exercising, however the lack of available expert help (e.g., psychologist, nutritionist) was extremely limited. While some boxers relied on the support of their clubs, others expressed their frustration about the difficulty and expenditure of accessing expert help. As noted by Dijkstra, Pollock, Chakraverty and Ardern [2016: 419], healthcare professionals are the most appropriate people to evaluate the health status of athletes and provide objective advice on management and clinical outcomes. Moreover, in elite sports, decision making about health-related matters is usually informed by health care professionals working with the athletes.

The boxers explained that due to the limited weight categories many of them did not naturally qualify for the three Olympic weight categories that are in place for female boxers, resulting in further issues regarding reductions in weight. This is an issue that rarely affects male amateur boxers' careers or more importantly their health. Crighton, Close and Morton [2016] suggested that introducing more weight classes in combat sports may reduce the prevalence of rapid weight loss strategies; however, the addition of female weight categories in amateur boxing is still a controversial topic within the International Boxing Association (AIBA) as this will result in the deduction of male weight categories.

For every addition of a female weight category, a male weight category will need to be relegated to allow for more places available for female boxers. The only identifiable strategy to help the female boxers reduce weight was through self-education via online resources. However, Reale, Slater and Burke [2017] assert that a combination of regular exercise and maintaining a low carbohydrate diet prior to a competition will allow combat sports athletes to reduce weight optimally. Consequently, it is crucial to inform boxers about the correct methods of weight reduction from the onset of their boxing career to reduce risk of health-related issues.

## CONCLUSION

This study sought to explore the gendered challenges experienced by female amateur boxers. These were analysed separately in relation to the early, middle and later years and then discussed around a series of conceptual categories that run across the career stages of the women boxers. Furthermore, the analysis detailed the strategies that boxers employed for each specific challenge, with a view to providing a knowledge base that could inform current and future female boxers and their support staff. Whilst providing a rich body of information through a detailed qualitative enquiry, the findings are limited by examining a single albeit important perspective (i.e., the boxer). Due to limited volunteers (boxers being away competing, attending training camps) and the novelty of elite female boxing, the researchers were only able to recruit eight participants. Drawing upon best practice [Keegan, Harwood, Spray and Lavalley 2009], further research examining multiple perspectives of those close to the female boxer (i.e., coach, parent, sport science support staff etc.) would help to triangulate the knowledge derived from this study and provide a valuable insight into how best to support these athletes. Furthermore, examining the experience of female boxers who are currently in the early, middle or later years would help to overcome the potential retrospective recall issues of the present design and add to the findings of this study. Indeed, innovative voice recording methods [Jamison et al. 2001] or daily diaries as utilised by Nicholls, Holt, Polman and James [2005], would provide a valuable, instantaneous insight into the lived experiences of female boxers. Future research should also attempt to build on this qualitative study and identify areas of good practice where females new to boxing have been well integrated into the sport. Indeed, a broader examination as to successful methods to integrate females into sports [Burke 2015] in general would provide a wealth of knowledge to help increase sport participation, and widen the pool of talent to progress through the performance levels.

Despite the limitations, the present research provides the first study to uncover the specific challenges experienced by female boxers through the lifetime of their boxing career in addition to identifying how boxers sought to deal with those challenges. In doing so, this study generated unique female specific challenges and common strategies, which could be utilised to best support the female boxers throughout their boxing careers. Clearly it is important that boxing is inclusive to all and based on these findings it is argued a number of steps can be taken to improve gender equality. Consequently, the recommendations for policy and practice are provided below:

- Firstly, media promotion of women's boxing is warranted by England Boxing to demonstrate gender equality and normalise women's boxing within the wider society.
- Continuing professional development (CPD) workshops are also required for coaches, particularly in regard to weight management techniques specific to female boxers, the influence of training on the menstrual cycle, and physiological differences between male and female boxers. Moreover, coaches should be made aware of inappropriate and derogatory language used within boxing gyms and how to eradicate this.
- England Boxing should prioritise women's boxing in ensuring that it is given an equal footing in comparison to men's boxing. For instance, women should have the same access to expert support (e.g. when injured) as their male counterparts and ensure officials are present and supportive of women's boxing events. Expert support would also benefit boxers' wellbeing, mental health and ultimately their performance [Moghadam 2017].
- On a broader level, the AIBA should consider more weight categories for women's boxing, following sports like Taekwondo and Judo, which provide an equal number of weight categories for their respective male and female athletes.

These steps would arguably help continue to progress women's boxing with a clear strategic lead, alongside developing a well-established women's boxing programme at the elite level.

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