

MAKING BOXING HISTORY: ANN-MARIE SACCURATO'S DATE WITH DESTINY

By: Rich Bergeron

Ann-Marie Saccurato (12-1-2, 5KOs) is just one of many professional females in the sport of boxing who still has to work a day job. We caught up with her recently as she was just getting her car out of the shop. Despite just inking a contract to fight for the first-ever undisputed welterweight world championship in the sport, she knows she will take home just a fraction of what any male fighter in the same position could command for a purse. With five world titles at stake in her match against hometown favorite Holly Holm (16-1-2, 5 KOs), Saccurato sees the "Destiny" card as her ticket to not only winning fame and recognition for herself, but also for elevating the women's fight game to a whole new level.

"I would love to be able to use this fight as something bigger than who comes out as the winner," explained Saccurato. "It could be really big and do a lot for the sport of boxing. It'll be televised nationwide, on The Best Damn Sports Show, and it will get women's boxing a lot of publicity. We'll have two great fighters slugging it out in there, and that will get a lot of respect for the sport."

Above all, she hopes to show that female fighters are worth more than the pittance they receive in purse money for each fight. Saccurato admitted she will only take home about \$3,500 at the end of the night after fighting Holm, but she knows the big payoff will be seeing how her fight inspires the growth of women's boxing and possibly revolutionary changes as far as fairly compensating the fighters. "Hopefully it'll result in more financial support. Boxers like myself just can't support ourselves with what we make on fights. I'm working all week, 7 days a week," she said. "It's a tough life, and I'm always in debt. It would be nice to change that for everyone else coming up and help earn more respect for those involved in it. What would put the icing on the cake would be to get it into the Olympics. That's what it'll take for the sport to really explode and get the respect it deserves."

The Destiny fight card Saccurato will headline features three women's boxing bouts televised live on Fox Sports network on March 22 from the Isleta Casino in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Saccurato, of White Plains, NY is the #1 ranked lightweight in the world. Against Holm, all four major belts are at stake along with two minor ones. The match will also be only the second female-headlining cable-televvised card in the sport's history.

Coming up from lightweight, Saccurato holds a WBC world title belt. In her last fight, she scored a huge upset for her lightweight belt by defeating Jelena Mrdjenovich in Mrdjenovich's hometown of Edmonton, Alberta Canada, by split decision verdict. "I'm excited about it," said Saccurato about what could be a very big break for her. She went on to explain she's glad to have the Legendary Hector Rocca training her along with new addition Juan Carlos Santana from The Institute of Human Performance in Boca Raton, Florida. Santana is her new strength and conditioning coach, and she's also utilizing a specialized training tent made by Colorado Altitude Training. She's also working with Champion Nutrition supplements to boost her diet and help her get up to the new weight.

"I'm at ease, and I feel as good as I ever did," she said. "I feel like everything is spot on for this fight, and everything is right including the name on the fight card being Destiny."

Saccurato has been a professional boxer since 2002 and was an amateur for about two years before that. "It's grown to be a passion of mine, and I just enjoy it because it's a sport where you can push yourself to your limits and beyond, and I just want to be able to inspire others to do the same," she said. "I kind of got into the sport by accident, and it was after being told I'd never play sports again after I had a really bad accident."

Instead of waiting a few more weeks to make history, if Saccurato had stuck with her initial discipline, she might have been one of the featured females in the groundbreaking female MMA fight on Showtime's recent EliteXC inaugural event. "I was training for an MMA tournament, and I was doing Jeet Kun Do at the time," she said about her first foray into boxing. "Someone told me about the New York Golden Gloves, and I thought it would be a good warm-up for my first MMA tournament. I went in naive and ignorant, but I ended up doing rather well as an amateur, just because of my athleticism and desire. My coach took me to my first fight as an amateur, and he never really taught me anything. It was a really bad situation, but I was able to get out of it, and I eventually fell in love with it, and it grew inside of me to a passion."

Saccurato feels a special motivation to win this landmark fight to further highlight her intense personal journey to the brink of death and back. As the main event of this world title, history-making card against Holm, she knows a win will be the ultimate symbol of perseverance that will hammer home the never quit mantra. "This is what's supposed to happen," she explained. "It's the next step in my journey, and hopefully I'll be able to inspire other people in the world, whether it's in boxing, or even in life, to get things done and accomplished no matter how hard they seem."

Saccurato calls her fighting style "the best of both worlds" as far as boxing and brawling. "I can move and box, and if need be, I can brawl with the best of 'em," she said. "I don't have a favorite punch, just whatever works, that's what I'm gonna go with. I feel good with any of my punches, and I have power in both hands--the left and right. We'll just have to see what Holly brings to the table that night." She's seen Holm fight before, and she's been working on some particular strategies to deal with the southpaw and increase her strength in order to make a smooth transition to the higher weight class.

Still, the toughest obstacles she faces are more financial than physical. "I have to travel down to Gleasons every day, and that's about an hour drive, and then I have to pay to park my car on top of that. Sometimes I end up having to miss work for training, and other times I'll work all morning, train in the afternoon, and then work all night," she explained. "Financially supporting my career is the biggest challenge I face. I've been trying to get sponsorships and endorsements, but right now it seems like Laila Ali is the only one of us making money. I don't want to take anything away from the praise she deserves as a fighter, but her name definitely got her all the attention, and there's a lot of females out there who can box just as well, if not better, and they aren't getting the respect they deserve."

She has made as little as 100 dollars for a fight, and there was only a \$5,000 purse for her first world title fight. "The guys are getting much more than that, but we're putting in the same amount of blood, sweat and tears as any guy out there. That really has to change," she argued. "A boxer's heart knows no gender, and why should there be any variance when it comes to backing and respect? There shouldn't be, and there's no good reason for that."

Saccurato hopes to help the sport grow to the kind of level where female fighters get paid just as much as their male counterparts. She knows she'll have to play her own part to "prove we are here, that we are serious, and we can take it."

She maintains she will likely only walk away from her huge championship effort with only a couple thousand dollars at best. On top of the lack of a big payday despite how far she's come, she explained that whatever money she makes will go directly toward her bank account overdraft. Between missing work, paying to fill her gas tank to travel so much, tolls, and 20-25 dollars each day to park her car, she has simply put herself in debt to chase her ultimate dream.

Come fight night, she knows she'll have to put aside all those concerns and get into combat mode. "The most important thing before a fight for me is getting in my zone, making sure my head is clear, and being able to focus on the fight," she said. "That's the time you have to make sure your boxing skill is sharp enough for the fight. I have to make sure my diet's clean and everything around me carries good, positive energy. A lot of people support me, so that helps."

She is really excited and hopes this fight can do a lot of good for the sport. She's putting in time and work with her full-time job on top of it all. "I'm very blessed to have people helping me out," she said. "I'm very thankful for all that." She was a bit cautious as far as a prediction. "I usually do my talking in the ring," she said. "I will say I feel very confident, and I believe that this really is my destiny."

he "Destiny" card is scheduled on March 22 and will be televised live on FOX Sports at 11pm Eastern Standard Time. To learn more about Ann-Marie, visit www.teamsaccurato.com or her MySpace page at: <http://www.myspace.com/teamsaccurato>



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