

## In the Ring, and Wearing One

**The OutField**  
**By Dan Woog**  
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If the number of female boxers is small - even the most ardent sports fan can probably name only one, Muhammad Ali's daughter Laila - the universe of openly lesbian boxers is infinitesimal. But they're out there. And if you've got a problem with dykes who jab and uppercut, you better not say it to Ann Marie Saccurato's or Angel Bovee's faces. They've both won national championships, and are intensely proud of their sport. They train like tigers, and could kick your, my, or anyone else's ass from here to Provincetown.

Don't talk smack about one to the other, either. Ann Marie and Angel might be demons in the ring, but they're softies off it. They cuddle just like other lesbians - often with each other. Ann Marie and Angel are not just two rising stars - they're a couple. In the Life, public television's long-running GLBT show, profiles them this month. The focus is on Ann Marie's most recent bout, for the World Boxing Council lightweight title, but it is clear from interviews and footage that both are pioneering individuals, and a unique team.

Angel Bovee (left) and Ann Marie Saccurato, two rising stars in the world of women's boxing, are also life partners. In some ways, women's boxing taps into all the old stereotypes about lesbians - what's wrong with these girls, they really just want to be men, blah blah blah. But Ann Marie and Angel's passion for their sport, and the articulateness with which they describe it, make it clear that female boxers, gay or straight, are simply living the line girls have heard for the past 30 years: "You can be anyone you want to be." In women's boxing, sexual orientation seems as unimportant as the color of your trunks. Trainer Hector Roca is straight out of central casting. A grizzled veteran (who trained Hillary Swank for her role in Million Dollar Baby), he treats Ann Marie like he treats his guys.

He watches every move, suggesting incremental changes; he challenges her to be quick, smart, ferocious; he grimaces along with every punch, as if he himself is in the ring. "She's got gladiator genes," he says admiringly.

"This is the ultimate test," Ann Marie says of boxing. "It's not just about physical strength, but heart and sacrifice. It's about what you will do for victory - just like life."

Ann Marie's professional record is 12-1-2, with five knockouts. But she could be winless, and she wouldn't care. In 1995, as a teenager, she was in a horrible automobile accident. She suffered a punctured lung, broken pelvis and hip, two broken legs, a shattered arm, broken ribs, and severe nerve damage. She was not expected to live. "After that, why should I be afraid of an opponent in the ring?" Ann Marie asks. "Why should I be afraid of being gay-bashed?"

Neither Ann Marie nor Angel - an amateur, who hopes to be involved if women's boxing becomes an Olympic sport in 2012 - seems afraid of anything. Part of their confidence may come from their accomplishments; part also may stem, surprisingly, from a sport that seems to prize machismo above all else.

"Boxing is traditionally a very accepting place," Angel notes on In the Life. "It was one of the first areas where black and white men could be together." Now women are proving their equality. "Male boxers are probably our greatest allies," Angel says. "There is so much love in the gym," Ann Marie adds. "The guys joke around with us. We gained respect by the years we've put in, and what we do in the ring." Sexuality is irrelevant.

Despite downplaying their lesbianism, they know they are role models. Closeted lesbians gravitate to them. "People want to train with us for more than good sparring partners," Ann Marie says. Boxing is a way to begin the coming-out process.

In some ways, women's boxing differs from men's. In the days before Ann Marie's title bout, there is little of the posturing and preening male boxers enjoy. And though she and her opponent both desperately want to win, camaraderie is evident between them. (Another difference: Both women handle their own promotion, management, and publicity; both have day jobs, as personal trainers.)

Ann Marie calls her fists "weapons of mass destruction." Yet, she says, "I can paint a picture with them. I can have fun with them. I can do whatever I want with my fists." Still, for all its artistry, this is a brutal sport. "You don't 'play' boxing," Angel says. But the rewards are enormous. Angel says she used to be afraid of many things. "But that's no way to live your life. You have to take risks, be on the cutting edge."

Both Ann Marie Saccurato and Angel Bovee live life on the cutting edge. Remarkably, in 2007, that life may not be so remarkable after all.

Lesbian boxers and life partners  
Ann Marie Saccurato (left) and  
Angel Bovee train together in the ring



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