

## Jackie Kallen: A Boxing Pioneer

Jackie Kallen found a love for the sport of boxing late in her career as a newspaper reporter, and she used that initial spark to create a bonfire in her heart. All it took was her attendance at one four-round fight to inspire the legendary "First Lady of Boxing" to shift gears and become a publicist for fighters. That led her to take a few more steps up the ladder until she became one of the first women to break the ranks of tradition in the male-dominated management side of the sport.

Watching that one fight (featuring Tommy "The Hit Man" Hearns at the beginning of what would be an incredible professional career) would lead Kallen to eventually leave the reporting behind. Instead of trying to win herself a Pulitzer Prize, she wound up guiding one of the most prolific fighters of the modern era: James "Lights Out" Toney through the prime of his championship career. It wasn't long until a Hollywood movie starring Meg Ryan chronicled her life and struggles to be accepted and then finally revered by her peers in the fight game.

As a child she never had dreams of being so intricately involved in the sport of boxing, but she did have the right attitude about life from an early age.

"I have always tried to live a spiritual life and do as much for the world (and the people who inhabit it with me) as possible. I always wanted to make a mark on the world so that after I'm gone people would know that I have been here," she said in a recent Fight News Unlimited interview. "I have never been a drinker, a smoker or a drug-user and I try to do something every day to make someone else's life better. I believe in the 'pay it forward' theory. I try to set a good example by my deeds—not just my words."

Growing up she learned how to be an independent, free-spirited woman from her mother, who set a wonderful example for her to follow. "She was a very progressive, free-thinking woman who was compassionate as well as brilliant," said Kallen. She also looked up to Barbara Walters. She admired the famous journalist because Walters was "successful at the career I aspired to."

Her unique, positive outlook paid huge dividends when Kallen finally managed to help elevate Toney to new, incredible heights. "After James Toney beat Michael Nunn in 1991, I realized that I was making a mark on the sport," she said. "I was being taken seriously and people were respectful of the hard work I put in day after day."

The James Toney she knew and helped bring to glory was a much different man than the guy who Samuel Peter knocked all over the ring recently. "I managed James for six years and he was like a member of my family during those years. It saddened me the other night to see him get badly beaten and then to hear him sound so pathetically arrogant and delusional after the fight," she said like a disappointed mom admonishing her insolent child. "I wish he would have had the grace and class to congratulate Peter on the win and admit that it just wasn't his night. A gracious James Toney is something I've always wanted the public to see because when James wants to be nice—he can be a real sweetheart."

There is so much about her career choice that she thoroughly enjoys despite the difficulties she faced to get where she is today. "I think I have always loved and respected the one-on-one aspect of the sport. Unlike a team sport, it is one combatant against another. It is a matter of who wants it more mentally, who is in better shape and who is more focused. I equate it to life in general," she said. "I am a very nurturing person and I find that managing a boxer involves being part mother, part babysitter, part psychologist and part business advisor. It is a very challenging role."

She saw that Hearns fight in 1978 for one of her assignments as a newspaper writer. She even interviewed the young future-champion at the Detroit event. "That night changed my life," she said. "I saw my first 'live' fight and I fell in love with the sport. I soon approached Emanuel Steward about working for him as a publicist. I did that for over 10 years."

Looking back she recalls a "very exciting" time for her as a woman making inroads in the sport that didn't normally invite females into the fold with open arms. "I always saw it as

an honor to be able to blaze a new trail and be a role model for other women," she said. "I believe it shows people that they can succeed at anything they make their minds up to do."

Though she did open the door for other women to follow, not many dared to even dip their toe in the foreign waters. The line behind her is not long enough in her eyes, even in the somewhat more accepting climate that exists today. "Interestingly, there are still very few successful female managers," she said. "There are female judges, female writers and, of course, female fighters. It astounds me that almost 20 years after I entered the sport, it is still a primarily male-dominated bastion."

Kallen pays no mind to being a minority and expertly helps steer the careers of a small stable of prospects she hopes to take to the same heights she once took Toney to. "I currently manage Matt Remillard, an 11-0 Junior Lightweight who won the WBC Youth belt; Jeannine Garside, 6-0-1, who is the WIBA Featherweight Champion; Reggie LaCrete, a 2-0 light heavyweight and Michael Peralta, a 1-1 lightweight," she reported. "I am about to turn two other boxers pro within the next couple of months. I also opened a gym in South Central LA in connection with the Sheriff's Department. This is a facility open to kids-at-risk. I hope to open more in other similar areas."

She started writing as a teenager, interviewing celebrities who passed through her hometown of Detroit. "As I said, Barbara Walters was a hero of mine and I always wanted a career as a celebrity journalist," she said. "I ended up doing it for over 25 years."

She is grateful for the accomplishments she's made both inside and outside the ring. "I would have to say that taking a 19-year old then-unknown James Toney to the top was something I am quite proud of," she said. "On the personal side I am most proud of my two grown sons who are such amazing people. And my two grandsons, who are developing into superb athletes, specifically in their chosen sport: Hockey."

Like anyone else, she has moments she would rather forget, too. "Career-wise my worst

moment was when James lost to Roy Jones and the sordid aftermath of that event," she recalled. "On the personal side, when my husband walked out after 30 years of marriage, that totally devastated me."

If she could go back and make one major alteration in her career she said she "would not have moved to Los Angeles after my divorce and given up my Galaxy Boxing Gym. I still miss that place and all the boxers who trained there."

As far as the state of the sport, she's concerned most about the "lack of marquee names." Like many who can remember better days when there were fewer alphabet organizations and more recognizable legends populating the public art of pugilism, she is nostalgic for when almost every major champion in the sport was a household name. "The average person cannot name one champion, and since boxing is primarily on cable, not network television, the audience is smaller than ever before," she said. "Bad decisions have tainted the sport and MMA is taking over with the younger fight fans."

She sees the rising popularity of MMA as a "major problem" threatening to absorb younger fans who might normally turn to boxing if MMA was not as prominent as it is today. "The older fans still enjoy boxing, but as they fade away the younger fans are growing up on MMA," she said. "They look at boxing as too boring, one-dimensional and 'old school.'"

Still, she is not immune to MMA fever herself and said she would "absolutely" get involved in promoting it if she had the chance. "I have my California promoter's license and have already done one MMA show," she reported.

Kallen also stays busy outside her career responsibilities and helps to counsel abused women. "I have been working with battered women for the past eight years, and it has become a passion of mine," she said. "I enjoy helping these women re-invent themselves and work toward re-entering the job force and society as confident, viable women. It is very fulfilling and satisfying."

Demi Nguyen, a female fighter we chronicled in an earlier interview, considers Kallen a true inspiration and said she speaks with her mentor every night. "She contacted me before she turned pro and I went to the gym to meet her and watch her train," said Kallen about Nguyen. "She is a beautiful person—inside and out—and I really want to see her succeed. She is an excellent mother and would make a terrific role model for young women. I don't manage Demi, but as a close friend I hope to see her build her record up, beat as many girls in her weight class as possible and go out there and capture a world title. I think she will be a positive influence on a lot of people."

She has a few of her own ideas about how to make women's boxing more appealing to the general public. She maintains that "more girls with star-power" are needed and "more exposure" would also help elevate female fighters. "Few female bouts are televised, so the public hasn't really seen the best that sport has to offer," she contends. "We also need really feminine women to showcase the sport. I have often heard it said that, when two women fight who basically look like men, the fans might just as well be watching male fighters." Kallen was inaugurated as "The First Lady of Boxing" in an article in RING MAGAZINE back in the early 90s. The moniker stuck, and she even appeared in The Contender reality series as part of the support team for the contestants. "I frankly wish I had been MORE involved. A lot of my scenes were cut out of the final edit and I thought it would have added a lot to have a more visible female presence," she said about the experience. "With that being said, I think the show gave a lot of boxers the chance to be seen, and it put more money in their pockets than they would have had without the show. It's a great concept and I hope the show continues."

As far as culling her own talented fighters from the vast field of multiple contenders out there, she has a simple formula. "I look for three main things: Natural ability (which you are either born with or you're not), good training and living habits (which amounts to "conditioning") and that intangible factor: heart," she explained. "The most talented and well-trained boxer will never get to the top without heart."

Although she has done so many incredible things already, she still has some important goals she hopes to reach. "I hope to have more world champions in the future, and I'd like to open up more gyms in bad neighborhoods where kids need a safe haven and a good diversion," she said. "And I'd like to go into color commentating. As for life in general, I just hope to continue doing the things I love and remain healthy."

Though she often points out that Meg Ryan's portrayal of her story in the movie "Against The Ropes" is inaccurate, she still maintains it is "very flattering!" The movie features Kallen as a single woman with no kids when she was actually married with children. "I really don't know why," she said about the producers changing reality for the screen, "But the true story is far more interesting than the script they came up with."

Kallen has also written a book: *Hit Me With Your Best Shot: A Fight Plan For Dealing With All of Life's Hard Knocks*. "The book was written as a way to help people live their life as if it were a championship fight. I find a lot of metaphors in boxing that apply to life," she explained. "I try to fight a winning fight every day. I am now writing a memoir, which is a very personal look at my life and what has driven me all these years."

She has some poignant words of wisdom for any woman out there who dreams of trying to tread where few women have gone before. "Develop a thick skin. Don't listen to other people's ideas of what you should be doing," she suggests. "Always take the high road. Just because you swim in a tank with sharks doesn't mean you have to become one. Retain your dignity at all times, don't resort to talking like a truck-driver just to be 'one of the boys,' and believe in yourself. Most people don't really want to see you succeed. They may cheer you on at the beginning, but once you reach a certain point, their jealousies and resentments take over and they try to pull you down. You can't trust everyone. I learned that there are just some people who are out to get you and you can't change that."

As far as what lies ahead for her, she's ready for whatever comes along. "I am always open to new challenges," she said.