

Herald Scotland

Friday 19 February 2010

Local Hero: Hilary Mack is a quiet girl making a big noise in Thai boxing



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Published on 18 Feb 2010

As she perches on the perimeter of the mat, legs splayed beneath her, Hilary Mack seems substantially younger than her 32 years.

Embracing a coffee to combat the chill that greeted her arrival at the Griphouse Gym in Maryhill a few minutes earlier, she draws herself into a jacket and talks in quiet, deliberate tones, an endearing shyness evident in her voice.

Yet while she might appear delicate, the reality is somewhat different. Tomorrow evening in Hamilton, Mack will metamorphose into a violent threshing machine; a blur of kicks, punches and hair unleashed on Spaniard Maria Curriki in a quest to become Women's International Kick Boxing Association world champion in the 53.6kg and under division.

Appearances, clearly, are deceptive. "When you step into the ring, everything else leaves your mind and you become a different person," says the world No.1, attempting to explain just how such a demure character can be transformed into the fearsome aggressor who will take to the canvas in the Hostile Intentions event at the University of the West of Scotland.

It has not always been thus. Growing up in Lenzie, Mack was a gymnast and even dabbled in modelling but, after beginning a psychology degree, decided it was time for a new discipline that complemented her existing abilities and alighted on Thai boxing – "I was never graceful enough for ballet". Initially attending classes at Strathclyde University with sister Kirsty in 1998, she had no intention of actually fighting but soon found herself at the mercy of a burning competitive instinct.

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Hilary Mack

Contests within the club led to bouts elsewhere in Scotland and finally, in summer 2002, to her first professional fight in the Atlantis nightclub in Bolton. Amid dancing girls and glitterballs, Mack was beasted but learnt a valuable lesson.

“All I can really remember is that there was lot of adrenaline,” she recalls of her first professional bout. “It was in a nightclub and you walked down the stairs from this balcony so it was a real spectacle. I was told to touch gloves at the start of the fight but my opponent decided not to bother and just . . .”

Her subsequent gesture indicates a burst nose was proffered.

That might have proved a rude introduction but it should have come as no surprise. As demanding mentally as it is physically, Thai boxing entails five three-minute rounds of vicious punching, kicking and blocking with every conceivable bodily weapon as the fighters attempt to knock each other out or display sufficient superiority to win on points.

Such intense hostility inevitably leads to hand-wringing, with certain sections of society particularly appalled that the more fragrant sex are indulging in such barbaric behaviour, but Mack – a masters graduate who spends summers teaching children in America and coaches in Glasgow for the rest of the year to pay the bills – is quick to debunk the dogma.

“It’s all about respect and building self-confidence, not about violence,” she insists, her protests inopportunately disturbed by a series of dull thuds from behind a set of doors at the far end of the room. “It just makes you more sure of yourself and more confident to run away faster from conflict rather than wanting to fight. It’s more like an old-school martial art in that sense.

“We are positive role-models because the girls here are not what people would maybe imagine because we’re not big and butch and are not just all muscles and no brains. It can be frustrating to be constantly fighting that attitude but it’s slowly becoming more mainstream and because of that more acceptable.”

Mack is contributing to that shift by running twice-weekly classes at the Griphouse specifically for juniors and women. Initial uptake has been encouraging, with many parents sending along their children in the hope that the sport will boost their confidence and self-esteem and a large constituency of females attracted by being among their own.

Remembering just how nerve-racking it was for her, Mack appreciates how important generating the right atmosphere is and is determined to make it easier for women to get involved in Muay Thai than it was when she started 12 years ago.

“It can be quite intimidating for women to walk into a class full of blokes,” she says. “You just need the desire to do it if you’re a female because there are a lot of barriers with a lack fights and politics in the sport but not all of them necessary want to fight any way, some just do it for recreation.”

Mack, at times, envys those women, especially during gruelling preparations for a fight when she seems to spend much of her life on the third floor of the Maryhill tenement which houses the gym. For the past few weeks, she has been at the Griphouse twice a day, six days a week “and sometimes a little bit more” as she trains for tomorrow’s contest and a further fight in Greece in March.

“You get tired but it’s more of a mental issue because you’re in here every morning and evening and just don’t get time to see you friends and family,” admits Mack, whose dedication has resulted in her becoming the first Scot to win a bout in Thailand. “Some mornings, you’re lying in bed and don’t want to get up, but all you think about is that while you’re lying there your opponent is training and might be getting the upper hand.

“It’s hard work but you wouldn’t do much in the sport or in life unless you did it.”

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