

OLYMPIC BOXER **MARLEN ESPARZA** IS A COVERGIRL



MODEL WITH A RIGHT HOOK LIKE A MACK TRUCK.

PUNCH and *Beauty*

TELL MARLEN ESPARZA SHE FIGHTS LIKE A MAN, AND SHE'LL SMILE AT YOU LIKE a Disney Princess. Esparza is more than a history-making Olympic boxer; she's the new female ideal in elite athletics, pursuing traditionally masculine athletic skills while radiating femininity when not in competition. Her unique combination of brutal brawler and photogenic beauty—which she displays for her high-profile sponsors like McDonald's and Coca-Cola—has made her a fan favorite of young girls, especially those in the Latino community. But make no mistake: She's serious about punching the lights out of her opponents.

The 23-year-old Texas native reserved her place in the record books last summer by being the first American female boxer to qualify for the London Games in the first year of the sport's eligibility. Then she went on to become the first American to medal in women's boxing, earning a bronze as a flyweight. Despite that notable achievement, the Houston-born pugilist isn't content; she's determined to maintain her amateur status and go for the gold at the 2016 Games in Rio De Janeiro.

Esparza has been defying conventions ever since she first laced up her gloves as a 14-year-old. Warned off of the pugilistic arts by family members, she kept fighting and learning, and now she seeks out the best minds in boxing to make her gold-medal worthy. The 5'3", 112-lb fighter is currently working with top trainers Brian Schwartz and Michael Bazzel, and nutrition expert Victor Conte, who is utilizing hypoxic training to take her endurance to a greater level. The trio rave about Esparza's work ethic, saying that she could teach their male fighters lessons on intensity and commitment to training.

Some question her association with the controversial Conte, who was the notorious mastermind behind the BALCO scandal that damaged the reputation of Barry Bonds and other athletes. But Conte, a consultant to professional male champion boxers, is dedicated to drug-free sport, advocating that athletes submit to a voluntary drug-testing organization called VADA. Esparza's insistence on working with Conte is another sign of her fierce independence and headstrong determination: She's nobody's puppet. And the move paid off, as she won her eighth U.S. National Championship in Spokane in early April.

We recently spoke with Esparza about the origins of her career, her hopes for the future, and her responsibilities as a female Hispanic role model.

BY JIM SCHMALTZ

Trainer Michael Bazzel
tapes Marlen Esparza
before a recent
sparring match.



Get Active: *You started boxing when you were 12 years old. How did that happen?*
Marlen Esparza: I've been around boxing as long as I can remember. My dad was a huge boxing fan. He never boxed, but when he got home from work, we'd excessively watch all these old boxing tapes that he bought. Then he let me start boxing and it's been my thing ever since. I feel that I was born to do this.

GA: *Did people try to talk you out of it?*
ME: My aunt didn't think it was a good idea at the very beginning. And then people in the gym didn't like me there. Once my coach started teaching me punching, using me for sparring, a lot of the guys were not happy. I was told by someone's dad when I was 14 that if I kept hanging around the gym, I was going to get pregnant. There was a lot of stuff that I had to protect myself from, but when I started winning, everybody accepted me.

GA: *How did you handle the pressure of being in the Olympics?*
ME: With anything like that, you have to keep concentrating on the basics. You've got to keep it simple. When you

start thinking, *Oh my God, I've got these sponsors. I'm the first girl! Everyone's watching me! I'm all over TV!* then it can get ugly. So number one, I had to keep it simple, and two, I had to get comfortable with getting uncomfortable. I was uncomfortable about 90% of the time, but I had to embrace it.

GA: *You made history with your bronze medal. How did that feel?*
ME: It was huge. But the thing I remember most is being the first to qualify [for the London Games]. Two of the other girls who went with me didn't even qualify. I didn't exactly reach the goal that I wanted to reach, but I feel grateful for the things I've accomplished and it's a big honor.

GA: *But your goal was a gold medal.*
ME: My goal is gold. It always has been.

GA: *Do you feel pressure to represent the Latino community?*
ME: I think of it more as an honor than pressure. I am who I am and I embrace it. I try to be a good role model. I'm being that person because I want to be.

GA: *The Hispanic population in the U.S. deals, disproportionately, with a wide variety of medical problems. Is this an issue you're concerned about?*

ME: Yes. The way Americans handle food and fitness in general is not good, and especially when it comes to Hispanics—the way we eat is horrible. I mean portions. You can eat what you want, but not excessively. A lot of Hispanic people grow up really sheltered. You do what you're told, and everybody has their role in taking care of the house or whatever. I feel like I'm opening that up. A lot of male and female Hispanics like what I do, and they can kind of see my life and take it from there. We like boxing, and I think the other aspects help.

GA: *How do you motivate young people?*

ME: First, you have to show people what they can be, what they're missing out on. If you don't have any enthusiasm to do something different, then you won't do it. Don't try to be active in something you don't want to do. People think [they've] got to run and lift weights, do the traditional thing to be in shape, and that's not the case at all. If you don't like running, don't run three miles. If you don't like lifting weights, don't lift weights. There are so many other things you can do—there's biking, you can walk your dog—substitute that with what you think you're "supposed to do." If you enjoy your workout, you're going to see results.

GA: *Do you think that you're going to be able to broaden the popularity of women's boxing?*

ME: I think I am. I think right now that's my job. I had all this stuff happen to me and then—boom!—I'm the face of women's boxing. You get so much attention. I've talked to so many kids and so many athletes. I was actually going to stop boxing if I got a gold medal in London, but then I thought, *For what? I love what I'm doing.* This is what I do and it's something that I was meant to keep doing. I think God wanted me to keep boxing.

“DON'T TRY TO BE ACTIVE IN SOMETHING YOU DON'T WANT TO DO.... IF YOU ENJOY YOUR WORKOUT, YOU'RE GOING TO SEE RESULTS.”

GA: *What special causes do you endorse?*

ME: Boys & Girls Club, Humane Society, Big Brothers and Sisters, PETA. I work a lot with anything that has to do with kids and animals. I want to be a child psychiatrist when I get older, too. Kids are really important to me.

GA: *Do a lot of young girls ask for advice?*

ME: All the time. I talk to girls all the time who say, “Hey, I just saw you boxing. I want to start boxing but my dad doesn't like it. What should I tell him?” I see little girls that start young. If these girls—10, 11 years old—are starting now, in 10 years they are going to be so good. I think that's going to change the sport. I think it's a beautiful thing.

GA: *Did you have to get over your fear of being hit in the face?*

ME: Well, you're not a normal person if you like to box, period. If you want to box, then you're already getting used to the idea. If you get hit in the face and think it's not what you thought it was going to be, then you're probably not going to do it. But if you can get over

that first six months of getting punched and how it feels, it's not so bad.

GA: *How did you start working with Victor Conte?*

ME: I started working with Victor Conte about a year and a half ago. I knew who he was—everybody in boxing knows who Victor is—and I needed to do something with my nutrition because I wasn't strong enough.

GA: *Did people warn you not to work with him?*

ME: I've had people give me a friendly reminder that if anything looks bad on my contract that sponsors could drop me. But if I had listened to people when I was 16 years old, I wouldn't be here. If I had listened when I graduated high

school, I wouldn't be here. So I erase people's opinions; I always have an open mind. I trust my own instincts and I trusted my own instincts with him. I know what's best for me as an athlete.

GA: *I have talked to people who see you in the ring and say, “She's hard.” And then they see you all dressed up and say, “Hey, she's hot.” Do you like to play off that kind of dichotomy?*

ME: I wouldn't want it any other way. I appreciate that people think I'm attractive because it helps bring attention to the sport. People say, “You fight? You're so girly.” I'm girly, but not in the ring. I like dresses, I like hair, I like makeup, I like eyelashes, I like high heels, though I can barely walk in high heels [*laughs*]. I want to have a family and do all that. I try to fight as masculine as possible, but when I get out of the ring, I'm a girl. When a girl looks like a girl but fights like a guy, it opens up people's minds.

For more on Marlen, visit marlenesparza.com, and follow her on Twitter: @Marlen112Boxing.



Power and Grace: (Above left) Esparza, right, spars with WBA flyweight world champion Carina Moreno. (Upper right) Esparza warms up backstage before the exhibition with Moreno. (Bottom right) At Undisputed Gym in San Carlos, Calif., with (from left) Moreno, trainer Rick Noble, Victor Conte, Bazzel, Esparza, and trainer and gym owner Brian Schwartz.