

## BOXING QUEEN – JIZELLE SALANDY



“I want to shock the world by beating Muhammad Ali’s daughter,” said Trinidad and Tobago’s 20-year-old boxing sensation, Jizelle Salandy. “Her record states that she is the best, but I will definitely beat her and take her title.”

Salandy’s eyes shone as she spoke. She leaned forward in her seat and, for the first time in an hour and a half long interview, lifted her hands in front of her face as though in a boxing ring.

“I study (Laila),” she said. “Our whole team studies her. She is a mechanical boxer. She is tailor made for me.”

She attempted to strengthen her claim by discussing the intricacies of Laila Ali’s boxing style, her past opponents and exactly what Salandy would do differently. Salandy smiled as if enjoying a vision of her illustrious rival’s confusion. A triumph over Ali, almost certainly the most famous woman to fight professionally, would be the crowning moment of the Fyzabad princess’s career.

Salandy already owns five world

titles and a spot in women boxing’s record book, but a win over boxing’s golden girl will capture global attention for herself and her country. It would arguably surpass even the achievements of her male compatriots like Leslie “Tiger” Fitzpatrick and Claude Noel.

Yet, there is an incongruity about the thought of Ali and Salandy sharing a boxing ring. The 29-year-old Ali, the most famous child of arguably boxing’s greatest fighter, was bred for a life of glamour. She is married to a former NFL player, co-authored a motivational book for young women and was a contestant on ABC’s popular “Dancing with the Stars” series in mid-2007. Ali pockets in excess of US\$500,000 per fight.

Salandy seems to reside in a parallel universe. Her pretty, youthful face has adorned enough sport pages and magazines, but she was surprisingly short on arrogance and ‘bling’. She comes across as a confident, calm, street smart young woman. Searching questions did not faze her. In fact, unlike many athletes, she seemed to enjoy discussing strategy and the complexities of her sport.

Boxing is generally about pain. It is the ability to endure hardship and inflict intolerable punishment in return - perhaps the last bastion of socially acceptable violence.

Former American heavyweight champion, Mike Tyson, spoke often of his love for dam-

aging another human being.

Salandy’s motivation is decidedly different and more personal. Once a fighter is identified, she enters a special period of training. Her alarm is set for 4.30 a.m. when she runs anything from six to eight miles.

After a shower and nap, she works out for another two hours in the gym and rests again before she completes her day with three to four hours of boxing practice.

Her rigorous training and self-sacrifice transforms the quiet young woman into the fighting machine.

“After all that hard work, I am ready to knock someone out,” she said. “It does not matter who they put in front of me. I am thinking ‘same licks’. It is rarely personal. Salandy does not want to be the ‘baddest’ boxer; she wants to be the best.

Born Joenette Giselle Ifi Toby, she was the third and last child of Merrine Salandy—a social worker with the city council. She never had much of

a relationship with her absent father and, after urging by her elder sister, Josanne, changed

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her surname to match that of her mother and siblings.

Salandy was 11 when her mother died from a heart attack and her life changed for ever. Her grandmother, Marjorie Salandy, returned from the United States to care for her family, but the pair rarely saw eye to eye and she gratefully accepted the opportunity to live with Ivy Corrion, a family friend, in Siparia.

Salandy had already shown good aptitude for sports at St. Bridgette Girls' RC where she participated in everything from netball to long jump and shot put. But she was always more interested in the rougher "boy games", which carried a higher element of risk.

Her new guardian's son, Joel Eligon, was a top amateur boxer and "Auntie Ivy's"

At 13, Salandy, armed with a falsified birth paper, had her first scheduled fight against a fellow debutante Nimba Wahtuse. Wahtuse lasted three rounds before running out of the ring.

"I thought 'wow, this big woman is afraid of little me', said Salandy. "It really boosted my confidence."

Four wins followed within the next twelve months before the local boxing commission caught on to her fraudulent papers and Salandy was debarred until she reached the permitted age of seventeen.

She found temporary solace abroad where some boxing boards were more lenient towards her tender age. At fifteen, under local promoter Boxu Potts, she became the youngest title holder in boxing history when she defeated 22-year-old Colombian Paolo Rojas for the vacant WBA

year including a TKO against American Elizabeth Mooney at Skinner Park, San Fernando in September 2006 that earned her the WBA and WBC Light Middleweight titles. No other boxer in Caribbean history had managed to secure both belts in one night.

Three months later, Salandy made history again as she defeated 32-year-old Moroccan-born American boxer Miriam Brakache on points at the Jean Pierre Complex, Port of Spain to add the WBE, NABC and IWBf titles to her WBA and WBC crowns. The feat was enough to see her named as the WBAN "History Making Fighter of 2006".

At present, Salandy, the 2006 Trinidad & Tobago Sportswoman of the Year and the world's most formidable light middleweight fighter, has 14 wins with no



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yard would regularly feature impromptu boxing matches on Sunday evening. Salandy was intrigued by the sport.

Eligon allowed her to follow him to the local gym where the sight of the little girl punching the heavy bag caught the eye of top lady boxer, Kim Quashie.

"She came and showed me how to hit the bag," Salandy recalled, "and I copied her advice perfectly. She called over (trainer Fitzroy Charles) to see and he showed me something else and I copied that too."

"Everyone seemed very interested and they were saying that I had good raw talent."

Salandy quickly became a regular at the White Eagle Gym where she learned the fundamentals of the sport from her new trainers. She lingered after her own work out to pinch moves from the gym's top boxers too.

"I studied Eligon's footwork," she said, "and I got my uppercut from Kelvin (George) and hand speed and upper body movement from Alexei (Alexander). I would observe them every afternoon and then go home and practice their moves."

Iberian-American Light Welterweight title in Curacao.

But, within the year, there were more movements in her personal life as she returned to Fyzabad to live under the care of neighbour, Curtis Joseph, who legally adopted Salandy and became her manager.

She changed her name to Jizelle Joseph and retained her WBA crown against Rojas, but it was her only fight under new management in over three years. Disenchanted, she turned her back on boxing and started a welding course.

Potts refused to let her leave boxing that easily though and, with Quashie's help, she was convinced to return to her vocation. At eighteen, she had been through three sets of guardians, as many managers and endured a string of empty promises. Sport was her release. It was her avenue for expression and asserting herself.

She changed her name, for the third time, back to Salandy – "Salandy was my franchise, no one knew Jizelle Joseph" and returned to the ring.

She had three fights within the next

defeats. Her place in history is assured and, although only 20, she has already planned for retirement. She assured *SPED* that she is saving from her earnings.

"I want to open a home for homeless children," she said, "giving them things for their basic needs and the chance to educate themselves."

In the meantime, she will fight anyone Potts places in front of her. But she has eyes for only one boxer - Ali. The formidable WBC and WIBA Super Middleweight champ boasts a record of 24-0. Twenty-one of those wins came by knock out and it is five years since anyone made Ali go the distance in any bout.

Salandy smiled at the challenge. "Laila is a flat footed boxer," she said. "She stands up and fist fights. She has a very powerful left, but all her opponents just stood up in front of her. I will be moving."

"If you are pelting cuffs at something and you couldn't hit it, you will get frustrated. I can adapt to any style and I know I can develop a style to beat hers."

It might be Trinidad and Tobago's most famous fight.