

Right On Target
By LISA JONES
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'I respect all my opponents. As Buddhism teaches, the only way to prove my true strength is to defeat a strong opponent.'

Conflicted. That's how I felt as I prepared to interview Lucia Rijker, an SGI-USA member, known to many as the best female boxer in the world.

To me, boxing is a blood sport, a celebration of mayhem. How can I write glowingly about it? And while I'm glad that women can buck tradition and pursue new interests, I sense something exploitive about the promotion of women's boxing. I mean, people pay money to see two women trade teeth-rattling, welt-raising blows....

Lots of people. Women's boxing is a fast-growing sport, and talented women like Ms. Rijker are poised to become superstars.

Despite my doubts about the cultural-enrichment value of boxing, I have to admit that I'll be cheering her on.

Because she is fighting for world peace, both inside the ring and out.

In a small, Italian restaurant, I sit across the table from Ms. Rijker, a stunningly muscular 29-year-old black woman with a Dutch accent. I realize almost immediately that I can't keep referring to her as Ms. Rijker. She's too warm, too personable, too Lucia.

"Boxing is a controversial sport," I say, "and women's boxing is even more so. How do you reconcile what you do in the ring with your Buddhist beliefs about peace?"

Lucia's deep brown eyes have a straightforward, penetrating quality, self-assured but not cocky. "I have talent, and I have to use it," she says, matter-of-fact. "There's no anger in my fighting. I'm an independent, strong woman who knows what she wants. I use the media attention to talk about Buddhism. I use my talent to encourage people."

Indeed. People have told Lucia that they find their own inner strength when they see her fight.

"When I'm hurt or tired, this bigger purpose keeps me going," she says. "Hitting and being hit? That's not fun. But being good at something — that's fun."

Lucia has worked hard to become good at what she does. As a teenager at home in Amsterdam, she learned kickboxing and ultimately fought her way to multiple titles as an international champion. She achieved fame and financial success. She traveled the world, learning about other cultures and about the business of athletics.

"There were many things happening," she says, "but I had no life other than my career."

Then a friend from England came to visit Lucia in Amsterdam and took her to a Buddhist meeting. "At first, I made fun of chanting," Lucia says. But as her friend told her more about Buddhism and taught her gongyo, Lucia says she realized "it was the first time that someone gave me something without wanting anything in return."

At the time, the Gohonzon wasn't available, so Lucia chanted to a wall. "I was very disciplined because of my sport," she says, "so I chanted three hours a day at first. I didn't believe in it, but it worked." One of her first benefits was the resolution of a difficult relationship with her trainer. "Then I started chanting for an opportunity in America," she says.

In her mid-20s, and having spent 10 years in competitive athletics, Lucia was on the verge of burn-out. She was ready for a vacation. So she came to Los Angeles for a visit and ended up staying for the past three years.

She had intended to abandon her fighting career, but three days after receiving the

Gohonzon in Los Angeles, Lucia was in a major car accident. She escaped serious injury, and it forced her to confront herself and what she was, or rather wasn't, accomplishing. "I had all this talent and capability," she surmises, "and I wasn't using it. As Nichiren Daishonin says, 'A sword is useless in the hands of a coward.'" She knew what she had to do.

She soon found work as a trainer and kickboxing teacher. Not long after that, Lucia caught the eye of a well-known boxing promoter who wanted to mold her into a female Mike Tyson, promising fame and fortune. Lucia declined the offer.

"I stand for something," Lucia says. "I'm becoming a strong woman who will set people free by what I'm doing. My words are worth nothing if I let someone take my soul and replace it with his own. Now I'm about to have it all — money and everything — on my terms. [she is scheduled for several pay-per-view bouts.] Because I was patient enough to wait until it came to me."

In the sometimes-oily business of athletics and entertainment, Lucia relies on the compassion she finds through her Buddhist practice. "I couldn't be a boxer without chanting," she says. "I'd get too disappointed in people."

There's a lot of "trash talk" and taunting that goes on, trying to pit one fighter against another. "No matter what is said by others, I respect all my opponents," Lucia says. "As Buddhism teaches, the only way to prove my true strength is to defeat a strong opponent."

Lucia trains for at least three hours each day, sparring, running and doing gym work. "It's very focused and demanding," she says of her day-to-day routine. "Sometimes I feel lonely, and I miss my family in Holland. Sometimes I just roll on the floor and cry like a child, like a kid with a stomachache. Afterward, I feel released and clear again." She smiles. "It's OK to not have all the answers," she says.

It's OK, too, to function with a little bit of ambiguity and paradox in one's life, I tell myself. Maybe boxing isn't necessarily a bad thing. After all, Shakyamuni taught people to "kill the will to kill" rather than to merely outlaw killing.

Lucia's will is to empower and liberate people through her boxing, not to cause pain or glorify violence. To me, that makes all the difference.

"Are you ever afraid in the ring?" I ask.

"Yes," she says, emphatic. "The only time I wasn't afraid was when I fought a man. I wasn't afraid; I was arrogant instead. I lost the fight and it hurt, but it was the best thing that could have happened. Fear is natural and important because it makes me go deep within myself to find my real strength."

"What's your biggest weakness?" I ask. I instantly regret that I've asked the most annoying tell-me-about-yourself question of all time.

"Self-doubt," she says. "What's yours?"

"Self-doubt," I say. But I'm not sure....

"What's your sign?" she jabs, playful.

"Aries. I get the point. No more goofy questions."

"Can you tell that I'm a Sagittarius?" she asks. "I aim my arrow high. With no conscious moves or steps, I just go after my arrow to reach my goal."

To me, that's pure Lucia: powerful, in flight, and right on target.

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