

FIERCE, COCKY, AND BUILT for stardom,
Marlen Esparza prepares to fight for the gold at
this summer's Olympic debut of women's boxing.

AMERICAN SWEETHEART

By IRINA ALEKSANDER

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NE EVENING IN mid-February, Marlen Esparza and her coach, Rudy Silva, arrived at the Northern Quest Resort and Casino in Airway Heights, a small suburb west of Spokane, Washington, and walked to an empty pavilion just past the slot machines. As they crossed the casino's kaleidoscopic carpeting, projector spotlights danced at their feet, wielded by lighting technicians trying out angles. A vacuum cleaner hummed among rows of chairs surrounding an elevated boxing ring where, in about an hour, Esparza would fight in the semi-finals of the women's Olympic boxing trials.

Unlike most of the other boxers participating in the trials, Esparza, who is from Houston, had declined the accommodations arranged for her by USA Boxing at the casino resort, and had chosen to stay at another hotel at her own expense. Esparza prepares for her matches psychologically as much as she does physically, and this means maintaining distance from her opponents before fights. "If we stay in the same place, that makes me feel like we're equal, and I don't want to feel equal," Esparza told me. "I want to feel superior."

This feeling, she has made evident to her opponents. "She once said I hit like a 12-year-old girl," said Alex Love, a 23-year-old boxer from Monroe, Washington, whom Esparza has fought and beaten three times. Esparza's confidence is not unfounded. At 22 years old, she is the six-time consecutive national flyweight champion. "She has a lot of experience, which she talks about a lot," said Love, who has been fighting for only three years. "But I have nothing but respect for her—granted, I lost to her, so I have to have nothing but respect."

After beating Love 22–12 earlier in the week, Esparza was preparing for her bout against Christina Cruz, a boxer from New York City. Esparza once told CNN that Cruz "boxes as a hobby. I box as a lifestyle."

Words that may seem unkind to her competitors are, to Esparza, basic strategy. To beat her opponents in the ring, she must first convince them—and, more important, herself—that they can't beat her. As a boxer, this is one of Esparza's great strengths. "She doesn't think she can be beat," says David Avila, a women's-boxing columnist for *The Ring* magazine. "The good ones are like that. If you start having doubts, it will show, and the other boxers will run you over."

Backstage, Esparza had to forfeit her territorial advantage. A small area sectioned off with long black curtains gave her visual, but not aural, privacy from Cruz, who was warming up just feet away. That was one reason for the silence between boxer and trainer as Esparza unpacked her gym bag and Silva unspooled a roll of white tape to wrap her hands and wrists. Another was that this would be the most important fight of Esparza's career yet. A loss would eliminate her chances to compete in the Olympic debut of women's boxing in London this summer. A third was that Cruz has proved to be Esparza's toughest opponent to date. Esparza had fought 63 fights in the United States and lost only two of them: one was when she was 12 years old; the other was to Cruz, last year.

Beginning her warm-up, Esparza rolled her head a few times and hopped up and down, alternating feet. Silva, a

Houston police officer with deep-set, serious eyes, pulled her arms behind her back, stretching them one at a time. As Esparza started to shadowbox, she threw varying combinations of jabs and hooks and quickly pivoted her feet across the black floor, angling out and ducking from her invisible opponent. The effect was like watching a rubber ball with fists bounce in taunting circles. Silva, dressed in jeans and a polo shirt, stood with his arms folded across his chest, studying her footwork.

Esparza's uniform was a pair of long red shorts and a loose red tank top with white trim. Her shoulder-length brown hair, which, when she's not fighting, Esparza prefers to wear down—she thinks it makes her look prettier—was in cornrows to prevent it from coming loose under her helmet. As an extra measure, she had tied an American-flag bandana around the braids.

Esparza is five feet three inches tall. Her large brown eyes, high cheekbones, and tan complexion make her look more like a TV anchorwoman than someone who gets hit in the face a lot. (In addition to being sponsored by Nike and Coca-Cola, she is the first American amateur boxer to have signed with CoverGirl.) Esparza, who has always tried to avoid what she calls "the boxer body," has a figure that is more feminine, less bulky, than the rippling musculature of her peers. But recently, she has become self-conscious about her back, which grew wide when she put on six pounds to meet the minimum Olympic weight class of 112.

Before arriving at the casino, Esparza had taken a nap, as she always does before a fight. To wake up, she takes a lukewarm shower; hot water, she has learned, can have a dehydrating effect. Just before she gets out, she turns the dial all the way to cold and shadowboxes for 10 seconds.

Outside the ring, Esparza is unfailingly cheerful. She smiles a lot, showing a neat row of square white teeth. Her voice, which is nasal and somewhat childlike, has a cartoonish pitch mixed with a Texan drawl. But before a bout, she goes quiet and asks that no one speak to her. When Gloria Peek, a coach with USA Boxing, passed her backstage, she gave Esparza's arm a light tap and kept walking. "Marlen is very intense," Peek told me. "She puts a lot of pressure on herself."

The only person Esparza will talk to right before a fight is Silva. "Man, my heart is like *ta-da-da-da-da-da*," she said to him at one point, tapping her fingers against her chest. "Like one of them machines they used to use to send messages."

The headphone dangling from her left ear was playing Christian hymns. She used to listen to Drake and Eminem, but she found that rap music riled her up too much before a fight. When she gets in the ring, she wants to be calm—to think about each punch, and never just throw it.

Esparza picked out a pair of red boxing gloves and Silva laced them along her wrists. As he began to guide her punches with a couple of hand pads, her movements grew more assertive, her responses faster, and each connecting blow was accompanied by a cry that came out sounding like an angry "Ha!"

Out in the audience were Esparza's father, David, and her pastor, Johnny Brady, who had flown in from Houston to watch the fight. Ten minutes before the bell, Esparza turned to Silva. "We're going to go pray," she said.

THE BOUT IN which Esparza lost to Cruz, last year, was never supposed to happen. In accordance with a new rule instituted by USA Boxing at the end of 2010, Esparza, as the winner of that year's national flyweight championship, had automatically secured a spot in a U.S. qualifier for the 2011 Pan American Games. But a group of other boxers, including Cruz, contested the selection procedures. As a result, a box-off between Cruz and Esparza was scheduled for March 2011 in Colorado Springs.

Cruz is a defensive fighter. She runs the ring and hits accurately but infrequently. Knowing this, Esparza planned to stay on top of her and fire nonstop punches. But Cruz, who is two inches taller, dodged Esparza's blows and countered with a precise right hook. Cruz won 10-7, dealing Esparza her first loss in nine years.

"It sounds mean, but for some of the other girls, they're used to losing," Silva told me. "But for Marlen, she took it real hard."

Back in Houston, Silva doubled Esparza's workout routine. But her confidence, her unwavering belief that she would always win, was bruised. She sought help from a sports psychiatrist, who thought she was under too much pressure and prescribed Paxil, an antidepressant. (She declined the prescription.) Around the same time, Esparza, who grew up Catholic, began attending Brady's non-denominational church with more regularity.

A few months later, at the USA Boxing 2011 National Championships, Esparza faced Cruz again. This time, Esparza won, 9-3, ultimately securing her spot in the Olympic trials and maintaining her national title. Still, for Esparza, entering the ring with Cruz is a bit like peering over a ski slope where she's taken a particularly ugly fall. She knows that she has beaten Cruz before and that she can beat her again, but still, her self-doubt lingers—and that, more than the sight of Cruz, frightens her. Before Esparza climbed into the ring in Spokane, her pastor, Brady, said a prayer for her: "Be with her, Lord, as You were with David when he beat Goliath."

ONE REASON THAT Esparza's opponents were able to successfully challenge USA Boxing's policies is that amateur women's boxing is a relatively young sport with still-developing guidelines. Historians believe that women have been participating in professional boxing in the U.S. since at least 1876, when *The New York Times* ran an article about a winner of a women's boxing match who collected \$200 and a silver butter dish as her prize. Yet women were barred from competing in amateur boxing—also known as Olympic-style boxing—as recently as 20 years ago.

Amateur boxing, for both men and women, differs from professional boxing in scoring and style. Unlike the televised pro prizefights, in which boxers pound each other in search of a knockout punch, amateur fighters win on the basis of a strict point system, relying on clean blows to the head or body during four two-minute rounds for women and three three-minute rounds for men. They wear helmets. The strength

behind a single punch is less important than precision and speed in the ring; the resulting matches are less sensational and more focused on technique.

Women's professional bouts have been televised since the 1950s, leading to the rise of "the Daughters"—Laila Ali (daughter of Muhammad), J'Marie Moore (Archie), Freeda Foreman (George), and Jacqui Frazier-Lyde (Joe)—in the

'90s and early 2000s. But because women's amateur fights are almost never broadcast on TV, the boxers (and the sport) have so far gained little national recognition. Women were not allowed to fight in amateur competitions until 1993, when a 16-year-old named Dallas Malloy sued U.S. Amateur Boxing, with the help of the American Civil Liberties Union, after learning that she could train but not compete.

"I got asked 'Why would a pretty girl like you want to box?'" Malloy, now 35, recalled when I reached her at her home, in Los Angeles. "I think one time I said, 'If I was ugly, would it be okay?'"

Malloy won her suit, and that fall, in October 1993, she beat Heather Poyner in the first amateur women's boxing match. (She left the sport soon after to pursue an acting career, appearing as herself in *Jerry Maguire* and as a vampire from Dallas on HBO's *True Blood*.)

The reasons for barring women from the sport were not entirely clear. Some officials worried they wouldn't have enough participants to stage national competitions. Others claimed health concerns. As women began to compete, in the mid-'90s, USA Boxing required that they wear breast protectors, based on the fear—and lacking the medical research to suggest otherwise—that getting hit in the chest could cause breast cancer or the inability to breast-feed. The gladiator-style plastic shields were to be inserted beneath a sports bra or tank top. Some were rigidly molded, with an individual cup for each breast.

"I don't know who they expected to fill these," says Christy Halbert, a former boxer and the chair of USA Boxing's women's task force. "Athletic women tend to have much less body fat, so they don't usually have large breasts, but these always had very ample bosoms."

The contraptions proved more harmful than protective, bruising and lacerating the boxers as they struggled to throw punches with cumbersome disks strapped to their chests. "As a boxer, you keep your elbows in—that's your defense," Malloy told me. "It completely hindered that."

After many women refused to wear the protectors, USA Boxing eventually made them optional. A 2009 medical report published by the International Boxing Association found not only that breast cancer was not a risk of the sport, but that women's boxing was in fact safer than men's, because of female athletes' flexible necks and lesser musculature.

Concern about low participation also turned out to be unfounded. Between 1995 and 2005, USA Boxing's female membership more than tripled, from 730 to 2,400 boxers. Three years ago, when the International Olympic Committee's executive board voted to include women's boxing in the

"If you're in the ring with Marlen and you're a female, you're probably going to get your butt whupped," says Termite, a coach at her gym.

2012 Games, it was the only new event added to the summer program. (Baseball, karate, roller sports, softball, and squash were rejected for both sexes.) This summer will mark not only the sport's Olympic debut, but also its introduction to American viewers, most of whom will be watching amateur women's boxing for the first time.

Though men will have 10 Olympic titles to compete for, women have been allotted only three: flyweight, at 106 to 112 pounds; lightweight, at 123 to 132 pounds; and middleweight, at 152 to 165 pounds. For those old enough to remember the breast protectors, a particularly sore subject is the International Boxing Association's suggestion that female boxers wear skirts in the ring so that spectators can distinguish them from the men. Though a recent vote has ruled the skirts optional, many boxers still feel pressured to wear them.

"It's like saying 'It's optional, but we want you to do this,'" Esparza told me, and then joked, "I'm going to ask them if I can do it shorter. You want a skirt? I'll give you a skirt."

ON THE MORNING of Esparza's bout against Cruz in Airway Heights, the boxers who would be fighting that evening gathered in a small, carpeted room off the hotel lobby to be weighed. The sun had barely risen, and most of the women sat around the waiting area in sweats, socks, and athletic sandals, rubbing their eyes. Esparza arrived with Silva. Dressed in black sweatpants, a white hoodie, and a red beanie pulled low over her eyebrows, she took a seat a few rows behind Cruz, next to the lightweight fighter Queen Underwood.

Esparza doesn't have many friends among the other boxers, but Underwood is one of them. Like Esparza, she has been the national champion in her weight class for several consecutive years, and the two tend to keep to themselves. "I don't think a lot of the other girls are too friendly on us, because they want to beat us," Underwood told me. "So we stick tight." Among her competitors, Esparza has a reputation for being a bit arrogant. This is due, in part, to her teasing of them in the press, and also to her many high-profile endorsements and the disproportionate amount of media attention she receives. (She is the only amateur female boxer known to employ a publicist.)

When Cruz and Esparza were called up together for their physicals, they stood inches apart, actively avoiding eye contact. Next to Esparza, Cruz, who is 29 and works as a secretary, looks awkward, almost mousy. She has long, straight hair that hangs over her sinewy frame, and she speaks in short, wary sentences. Her trainer, Marcos Suarez, who is said to also be her boyfriend, hadn't accompanied her to the trials. Every time I saw Cruz, she was by herself.

Many female boxers have troubled backgrounds. Underwood has spoken publicly about being sexually abused by her father; Tyrieshia Douglas, a fighter in Esparza's weight class, told me that she grew up in more foster homes than she's able to count; Cruz, whose mother was in prison for most of

Cruz's childhood, was raised by her grandparents. Though Esparza's parents are divorced, her upbringing was relatively stable, which she thinks may explain why some members of the press have favored her underdog opponents.

"So I have to feel guilty because I came from a good home? Or I have to feel guilty because my parents aren't drug addicts?" she says. "I guess I'm in a poor-person sport. Not like I'm rich or anything, but if I was in gymnastics or, like, tennis, no one would think it was weird that I had a lot of support."

ESPARZA GREW UP in a single-story white-brick house across the street from a vast, marshy bayou in Houston's Harris County, an industrial area dotted with pawnshops and used-car lots. Her father, David, immigrated from Ciudad Juárez as a teenager, and works as a supervisor at a local welding plant; her mother, Carmen, who was born in El Paso, is an assistant at a dental office.

David is a devout boxing fan. The way some families watch football, the Esparzas—Marlen is the third of four children—would gather around the TV in the living room to watch VHS tapes of the Mexican professional boxer Julio César Chávez. David encouraged his sons, Diego and David Jr., to take up the sport, but resisted when Marlen showed interest. "I'm a Mexican guy," David told me. "I like the sport, I just never thought it was for women." But when there was no one else to accompany David Jr., his youngest, to the gym one day and Marlen volunteered, David gave in.

Growing up, Esparza was the most outgoing of her siblings, pulling pranks—a recurring one involved painting her father's toenails while he slept—and telling jokes at the dinner table. "I always told her she could be an entertainer," Carmen says. But after she was picked on in grade school for being chubby, her clowning turned into an attention-seeking bad attitude. "I lost weight and turned really mean," Esparza says. "I had a lot of problems with girls, especially." In seventh grade, she shoved a classmate's head into a chalkboard and was transferred to an alternative school. That year was when Esparza, 12, walked into Rudy Silva's gym.

Silva, who was in his late 20s and training to be a cop, had just opened a space in the nearby area of Pasadena, where he trained some of the local kids. On her first day, Esparza joined the beginners. "Man, this is lame," Esparza remembers thinking. "I thought I would be boxing." Nearby, Silva was leaning on the edge of a ring, observing some of the older boys spar. Esparza marched up to him and asked to train in his group. "He looked at me like I was a dog or something," she says.

In February, I visited Silva at Jefferson Davis High School, where he is assigned by the

Houston Police Department. On the wall of Principal Jaime Castañeda's office, where Silva met me, autographed photos of Esparza climb all the way to the ceiling. "I'm not a boxing fan," Castañeda told me. "I'm a Rudy-and-Marlen fan."

At 38, Silva, who boxed as a teenager, is fit and good-looking, with the unemotional demeanor that typically accompanies both his professions. But when asked about the day he met

"I got asked 'Why would a pretty girl like you want to box?,'" says **Dallas Malloy, who fought in the first amateur women's match.**
"If I was ugly, would it be okay?"

Esparza, his features soften as he tries not to smile. "I said 'No, no, no, no,'" he recalled. "I don't train females." As Silva remembers it, Esparza asked him again the next day and again he said no; but he kept an eye on her. Esparza—"just this feisty, tiny thing," he said—was clumsily pummeling every bag. When she returned a third time, Silva agreed to show her a few things. "But I'm not going to train you like a girl," he told her.

At first Silva wanted to make her quit, so he put Esparza in the ring with the older boys and assigned the group impossible drills. In about a week, the boys started quitting, but Esparza remained. That year, he trained her for a local Golden Gloves tournament; she won. Her father was, by then, on board. "She jumped on that girl like it was nobody's business," David told me. "She was like a little grasshopper."

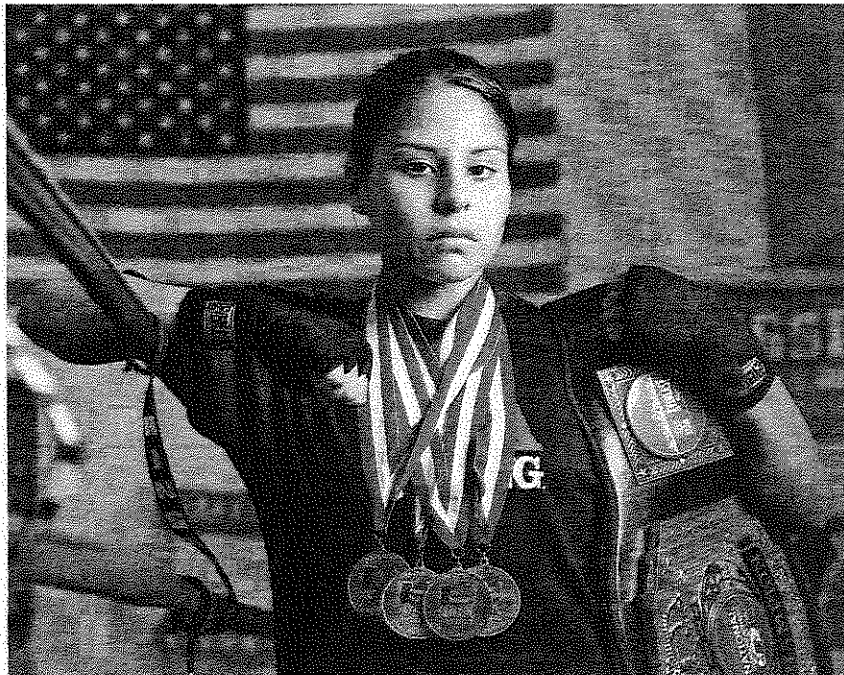
When her parents divorced a few years later and her mother moved out, Esparza chose to stay with her father so she could continue training. She went on to win the Houston Regional Golden Gloves championship eight years in a row and to become, at 16, the youngest female fighter to win the National Championship. "We just started fighting and winning, fighting and winning," Silva said.

Esparza's behavior improved, too, and a year after she began boxing she returned to her regular school. Her savvy with the press can be attributed, at least in part, to the debate club, which Silva encouraged her to join once she began receiving media attention. "Because they'll put a microphone in front of your mouth," he told her, "and then what are you going to do?" By the time Esparza graduated from Pasadena High School, in 2007, she held a 4.1 grade point average and was class president.

Boxing's violence, for Esparza, has never been its primary appeal. Her objective isn't to hurt, but to outwit, outrun, and overpower her opponent more with her mind than with her hands. "And that's better than being angry," she said. "It's never going to go away."

MINUTES BEFORE THE opening bell of her bout with Cruz, Silva was speaking to Esparza in a low, stern tone. "Try to stay relaxed," he said. Esparza was sitting on a chair backstage. Her right knee was bouncing rapidly and her gaze was fixed not on Silva, who was crouched down in front of her, but on her feet. "The reason you're ranked first in the nation for six years straight is because you're the best," he said. "Don't go out there and doubt yourself. Go out there and be confident. Be patient. Remember to box."

When the announcer called Esparza to the ring, Christina Aguilera's "Fighter" came over the speakers. The audience cheered. As Esparza emerged from behind the curtain, her blank, anxious expression gave way to one of her self-assured smiles.



In addition to having Nike and Coca-Cola as sponsors, Esparza is the first American amateur boxer to have signed with CoverGirl.

At the bell, the two boxers came at each other in a hurry and then stopped, as if they were two people who couldn't decide on a greeting. Esparza sprang forward first, with a fast left-right combination—known as a "one-two"—which Cruz seemed to anticipate and block easily. They bounced on the balls of their feet and moved clockwise, taking turns reaching for one another but catching only air. Each time one lunged forward, the other moved back. Some time into the first round, it was unclear whether either boxer had scored. The crowd wanted action. "Double jab right here, Tina!" yelled one of Cruz's fans. "Let's go!" hollered another. "Stop waiting on her!"

Among the voices, Esparza's father's was loudest. David, a plump, easily excitable man of small proportions, had jumped out of his seat at the first bell and was frantically pacing the aisle. "She don't want to fight you, Marlen!" he shouted. "She scared!" Esparza can always hear her father when she's in the ring; so can her opponents, which is sort of the point. But ever since a referee stopped one of Esparza's bouts when David screamed "Finish her!," he has had to choose his words of encouragement more carefully.

"In my English, I didn't mean 'Kill her,' or nothing," David says. "I just meant finish the fight. I thought I was helping." Due to the frequency and cost of travel, Carmen doesn't attend her daughter's tournaments, but she's been saving up to buy a ticket to London, should Esparza make it to the Olympics.

Chasing Cruz around the ring, Esparza delivered a blow with her right hand that sent her opponent backpedaling into the ropes. Esparza quickly buried another combination and followed it up with a series of rapid-fire punches to Cruz's torso. "Beautiful!" David screamed. Dodging Cruz's fast counterpunches, Esparza seemed to strike and duck in a

single motion, like an angry bird pecking and darting out of reach. When the bell rang, Esparza led, 3-1.

When Silva reminded Esparza to box, he wasn't being patronizing. A few years ago, her only strategy in the ring was to win. She would pound her opponents relentlessly, exhausting them and sometimes coming out with a 20-point lead. But in 2009, when the International Olympic Committee added women's boxing to the 2012 program, Silva began researching international styles and videotaping amateur men's bouts. Esparza's reckless offensive style, he realized, wouldn't stand up at international competitions, where clean, efficient punches and impermeable defense were key to scoring points. (A decade ago, female amateur boxers were almost always trained with the aggressive professional style in mind, since many—not having the option to ever fight on the Olympic stage—eventually went pro.)

Silva decided to train Esparza to be a more mindful fighter, focused less on her strength and more on her opponents' weaknesses. "I had to get it into Marlen's head that it didn't matter if she won by one or 101," he said. "A win is a win."

Together, they began reviewing footage of Esparza's opponents, looking for defensive holes and devising custom fight plans. "I used to just fight, but now everything is mapped out before I get in there," Esparza told me. "If I say I'm going to box this girl and she starts getting really aggressive, and I get mad and want to start swinging with her, I just step back and say, *No, that's not the game plan. That's not how I win.*"

To improve her versatility in the ring, Silva handpicked boys for Esparza to spar with—taller boys, stronger boys, faster boys, left-handed boys—to stand in for every imaginable opponent. Observing Esparza in the ring at international tournaments the following year, Joe Zanders, USA Boxing's national coach, took note of her new, calculating approach. "She was so knowledgeable about her opponents, that she could actually tell you, 'I want to go about it like this,'" Zanders says. "Watching her do that, and then actually execute it in the ring—it was really amazing."

ASPEN SONG

The sound of water in the air
cools even summer sunlight,
as though the upland pasture
remembers oceans at this height
when even dirt and rocks were young
(warm-blooded life had just begun).
The breeze plays leaves in sweetest treble
and never tires of its long fable,
in counterpoint to human foible.

—Robert Morgan

Robert Morgan's most recent collection is Terroir (2011). He teaches at Cornell University.

Training for the Olympics also meant that Esparza, who had been accepted to Rice University, would have to delay school. For a while, she tried taking online courses at a community college, but then came her loss to Cruz last spring.

Esparza doesn't like to talk about that time. Most troubling was the sense of failure she began to feel around Silva and her father. "I'm supposed to be the robot," she said. "I'm supposed to do it right." Silva, who saw the loss not as Esparza's error but as his own, increased her workouts from several hours each day to a full-time commitment, leaving no time for classes.

On a typical day leading up to a competition, Esparza wakes up at about 8 o'clock and drives to a fitness center 45 minutes away, where she works with a strength trainer and swimming coach on her stamina and conditioning. She heads home for lunch, usually chicken breast or pork loin—no sauce, no seasoning—with vegetables. She takes a nap. In the afternoon, after Silva gets off work, she meets him at the boxing gym. There, she spars with the boys for up to nine rounds, jumps rope, performs hand-eye coordination exercises, runs plyometric drills, hits the bags—Silva used to have her wear a painter's mask while doing so, to approximate high-altitude training—and finishes up with a grueling calisthenic workout modeled after that of Manny Pacquiao, the Filipino pro fighter. Sometimes she throws up and keeps going.

In the evening, after the gym, Esparza runs anywhere from one to four miles, depending on what Silva prescribes. If she has any energy left, she likes to go over to her sister Dalila's house to see her nieces and nephew. "Or she'll call and say 'Can you guys come over? Just for a little?'" Dalila told me.

In some ways, Esparza is still the child she was when she first walked into Silva's gym. She is uncomfortable around adults she doesn't know and prefers the company of kids. Her favorite foods come from Wendy's and McDonald's, and she loves Starbucks' sugary frappuccinos. When she has free time, she likes to watch the Nickelodeon channel; her favorite movie is *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*. At 22, she has made only one real decision in her life: to box.

After the Olympics, Esparza plans to quit boxing. She's not interested in turning pro, which she sees as a lesser, sloppier version of the amateurs and, given the costs of trainers, agents, and promoters, not especially lucrative. Instead, she plans to start college and study to be an anesthesiologist. Someday, she'd like to get married and have two, maybe three, children. Her real life, she's always told Silva, can begin only after she leaves the sport.

AS THE BELL announced the second round, Esparza and Cruz skipped toward one another with more purpose. Whereas Cruz likes to draw her opponents out and score her points defensively, Esparza prefers to come forward. But the strategy she and Silva had devised for beating Cruz consisted of gaining a lead in the first round and then pulling back, placing the offensive burden on Cruz. When I spoke with Cruz the night before the bout, she seemed to anticipate this tactic. "I know she ain't going to run at me like she used to," she said. "It's going to be more like a chess match."

At the start of the round, Cruz took the center of the ring, seemingly accepting the role of aggressor. Esparza was ducking Cruz's jabs, keeping her hands so high that her gloves obstructed her face. Cruz switched up her combinations, throwing an uppercut and an overhand right that broke through Esparza's defense. Even in the more passive role, Esparza countered every one of Cruz's advances, shooting forward each time Cruz's fist withdrew. At the ring of the bell, Cruz had added two points and Esparza three, for an overall score of 6-3 Esparza.

In the corner, Silva pulled out a stool for Esparza and tipped a trickle of bottled water into her mouth. Kneeling in front of her, he reminded her to be patient. "Don't force it," he said. "We're up."

Unlike other boxers, who often question their coaches' corner commands, Esparza trusts Silva's instincts more than her own. "If he tells me spin three times and hit her in the face, I'll spin three times and hit her in the face," she told me. As a constant presence in her life for more than 10 years, Silva has played the role not only of coach, but also of overprotective father, nagging older brother, and closest friend. Now that Esparza is an adult, some people wonder whether Silva, who looks younger than his age, might also be her boyfriend. And though he is not—he's married and has three children—they share the intimacy of two people who have grown extraordinarily dependent on one another over time.

When Esparza was a teenager, she would ask Silva's permission to go out on weekends and see her friends. He allowed her to attend her high-school prom but waited up with her father in the living room. "Marlen's dad was the laid-back dad," said Kasandra Hernandez, the only high-school friend Esparza has stayed close with. "But Rudy was, like, her strict dad."

Because Esparza's parents had never talked to her about boys, Silva took it upon himself to have a series of what he called "father talks" with her. "He told me in a nice way, 'Don't be a slut,' basically," Esparza recalled. "He said, 'I know young girls and I know fast girls, and you don't need to be like that.'"

Esparza doesn't have a boyfriend, but guys she's dated in the past have felt uncomfortable about her relationship with Silva. Some asked why she always had to abide by his rules; others wondered whether Silva might be in love with her. "But it has nothing to do with love," Esparza said. "It's about the commitment we have to boxing. Normal people who have regular lives and no boundaries just can't understand it." According to Silva, his wife doesn't object to the amount of time he devotes to his boxer. (Esparza: "I don't think she likes me.")

A few days after the Spokane tournament, Silva showed me around his gym, which he had recently moved into a small, carpeted space adjacent to Pastor Brady's Houston church. A collage of photos taped to one wall—a shrine of sorts for the younger fighters to admire—is almost exclusively dedicated to Esparza. But in a few of the pictures, Silva stands next to

Sylvia Villalpando, a female boxer he once coached, who has since left the sport.

"Marlen probably wants me to take that picture down," Silva said. The two women competed for his time and attention, Silva explained, and Esparza in particular seemed to grow resentful. "I think she felt like, 'Hey, this girl just came in here. I'm your star,'" he said.

Another coach at the gym, a pro boxer turned pastor called Termite (the moniker is inspired by his family's pest-control business), told me that Esparza feels an instant rivalry with any female fighter who walks into the gym. "She'll get the girl's attention and let her know she's the boss," Termite said. "If you're in the ring with Marlen and you're a female, you're probably going to get your butt whupped."

Silva and Esparza bicker often, but the worst fight they've ever had occurred last year, when Esparza, for the first and only time in her career, considered leaving Silva for another coach. Neither can recall—or will say—how the dispute began, but for weeks they didn't speak. They reunited only at the urging of Esparza's father. "I told her, 'Those other guys don't know you like Rudy,'" David said. "'If you're going to finish your career and make it to the Olympics, you have to do it with Rudy.'" In retrospect, Esparza doubts she could have ever left Silva, even if she wanted to.

When I asked Silva how knowing Esparza has changed his life, he stumbled over his words for a few minutes. "Honestly, without me, maybe there wouldn't be no her," he finally said. "But without her, maybe there wouldn't be no me."

AT THE THIRD BELL, Cruz sprang toward Esparza with newfound energy. Esparza was trying to reclaim the offensive position at the center of the ring, but Cruz refused to budge, driving Esparza to the periphery and flicking her right fist again and again. When Cruz scored, Esparza responded with a series of body jabs, but she seemed to barely penetrate Cruz's defense. Soon enough, Cruz scored again, this time with a mighty hook that sent Esparza's head ricocheting. Cruz's message was clear: the first two rounds might as well have been her warm-up; now she had decided to win. Cruz scored once more before the bell, winning the round 4-3 and closing the gap to just two points.

After a short break, the referee lifted his hand and the boxers surged into each other for the final round. In a matter of seconds, Cruz landed two hooks. Esparza, flustered, lowered her hands, and Cruz struck again with a hook and a quick right hand. As Cruz continued to apply pressure, Christy Halbert, who was narrating the bout for a Webcast, observed that Esparza appeared to be slipping. From the corner, Silva shouted, "Keep your hands up!"

When Esparza is in the ring, the cacophony of thoughts that torment her before a fight goes silent. Suddenly aware of every muscle in her body, she feels as if she has complete command not only of her own movements but of her opponent's. She knows what's coming and how she will respond to

When Esparza is in the ring, she knows what's coming and how she will respond to it, as though she is taking a test to which she already knows the answers.

it, as though she is taking a test to which she already knows the answers. There is not a moment in her life when she feels happier, or more certain of herself. "I feel like I can do anything I want when I'm in there, when I want to do it," she says. "Like I'm not even the same person."

I once asked Esparza if that other person—the one she is outside the ring—lacks control. She nodded. "I'm told what to do and when to do it," she said. "Boxing controls me, and I don't control anything. I'm a boxer and I box and that's all I can do."

Now, in the ring with her biggest rival, that is what she did. Esparza raised her hands and took a wider stance, setting her feet to hit hard. After landing a powerful right fist, she peeled away before Cruz could counter. Esparza regained her rhythm hit by hit, coming at Cruz harder, stronger, faster than she had when she first entered the ring. She then buried a combination of hooks and jabs with such force that Cruz inexplicably turned her back to her opponent, prompting a warning from the ref. Esparza's father clutched his head in his hands. "Ooh-ya-ya! Ooh-ya-ya!" he yelled. "All night long, Marlen, all night long! Just like that!"

Cruz was swiveling furiously and swinging in vain. Esparza delivered clean, beautiful hits. She flicked one combination, then another. And before Cruz could get her, she was gone.

When the final bell rang, Esparza had won the bout, 13–10. Two days later, when she beat 23-year-old Tyrieshia Douglas in the finals, Esparza became the flyweight champion of the U.S. Olympic trials.

THE TOURNAMENT ENDED on a Saturday in late February, and that Monday Esparza was welcomed back to Houston with a surprise party. At her church, just off Interstate 10, a mixed crowd of parishioners, boxers, trainers, and kids gathered around two store-bought cakes in a room with linoleum floors and red, white, and blue balloons bobbing beneath a low ceiling. When Termite led Esparza and Silva inside, everyone yelled "Surprise!" and applauded. Esparza summoned one of her wide, friendly smiles, but she looked tired. The back of her navy-blue Nike training shirt said **TEAM ESPARZA**; the front said **BEAST**.

Some people snapped pictures on their cellphones; others asked her to autograph newspaper clippings. A little boy handed her a bouquet of purple flowers. A woman from the congregation presented her with a gift of a gold pendant in the shape of a fish, a nod to her first name.

A second party was waiting for Esparza at her house, where a local news van was parked in the muddy driveway and a cameraman roamed the kitchen. In the large, carpeted living room, Carmen was watching Dalila's kids. David appeared to be in a good mood, supervising ribs on the barbecue and offering his guests drinks provided by Coca-Cola, one of Esparza's sponsors. Her parents had invited a few of her friends from high school, but she hadn't seen them in years and felt awkward greeting them. Mostly, she looked

antsy, wandering from room to room like someone brought to a party full of people she did not know.

"It was annoying," Esparza told me a few days later as we were driving to lunch. The golden fish was dangling around her neck, but the purple bouquet had wilted in the backseat of her car. For the first time since we met, she was wearing non-workout clothing: jeans cuffed above the ankle, a heather-gray tank with pink flowers, and sandals. "It's not that I'm unappreciative, but I'm always so shut off that I don't know what to say to people."

For lunch, Esparza had chosen the Olive Garden, one of her favorite places to eat, and she ordered an entrée that combined lasagna, chicken Parmesan, and fettuccine Alfredo in a single dish. Now she could eat anything she wished. But soon she would have to resume her regular diet to prepare for the 2012 Women's World Boxing Championships, in Qinhuangdao, China, in May.

Though Esparza had won the U.S. Olympic trials, she would still have to compete against flyweights from other countries to make it to the Games in July. Only eight boxers in each of the three weight classes would go on to London from the Worlds, with an additional four women to be selected by the Olympic commission. Up against some 60 flyweights from around the world who would be competing for these spots, Esparza's chances were good. At international competitions in recent years, she had won two gold medals, two silver, and one bronze. Her greatest challengers in May, she predicted, would be Ren Cancan, of China, and Tatyana Kob, of Ukraine.

Looking past China to the Olympics, Esparza could imagine a scenario in which she wins the gold medal—but not one in which she doesn't. "I feel like it will complete me—like it will make me what I want to be," she said. "I don't want to see someone else win." Esparza put her fork down, and a tear slid down her cheek. "It would be like someone else living what you're supposed to be living, and feeling what you're supposed to be feeling. It's like someone stealing what I want to be." She paused again, wiping her eyes with her cloth napkin. "Failure is when your best isn't good enough, and I'm trying as hard as I possibly can."

Esparza finished her entrée and we ordered dessert—fried zeppoles with chocolate sauce. When I asked her how she envisions her life after the Olympics—after boxing, that is—she recalled driving to the gym one morning and seeing two girls, about her age, who looked like they were going to the mall. Esparza wondered what the rest of their day might be like, whether they would see their friends, or go to the movies. "And I was thinking, *What the heck would I do all day?*" She considered this for a moment. "It's like a small kitten or an inside dog that scratches at the door all day, but when someone finally opens it, they don't want to go," she said. "They just look." ■

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