



HALBERT

## Boxing

# Persistence, with a punch

Christy Halbert transformed herself into one of the best female coaches in the world, and brought women into the Olympic boxing ring

**By Alexa Jenner**

*City Paper correspondent*

**To Christy Halbert**, boxing is more than just fighting someone in a ring. It's a battle with oneself that champions can learn from and grow from every time they slip on their gloves.

"This sport has incredible transformative powers, and I would love for everyone to get to experience that," Halbert said. "My goal is that boxing become a sport where people can transform themselves and we can transform our culture by learning the lessons we learn in sports like boxing."

After four and a half years in East Nashville, Halbert is in the process of moving her nonprofit gym, Boxing Resource Center, to Merry Street on the northwest side of town. Dedicated to training youth and adults in Olympic-style boxing, it welcomes boxers of all ages and backgrounds.

The gym also inspires students to succeed outside of the ring, with programs such as "Hit the Books" that hold students accountable for their grades. If they don't make the grade, practice time is used for studying.

Now Halbert will take what she calls a "very successful system" and try to figure out what they can do to best complement the new neighborhood.

Jeanie Crowell, 63, of Brentwood, began training with Halbert at her first location in 2007. She had never boxed, but determined to lose weight and get in shape, she turned to the phone book, where she found the Boxing Resource Center.

Crowell said when she first met Halbert she was 156 pounds. Today she's at 115.

"I was starting at square one, since I was older, but she brought me up to this level," Crowell said. "Boxing is a very, very difficult sport. It's like tennis — it's an extremely high-performance sport, and people have to commit to it."

Halbert discovered the world of boxing in the early 1990s, during her final semester at Western Kentucky. She needed \$500 to get her car fixed, and as a scholarship volleyball and track and field player, she was not allowed to get a job. So when she saw a flier for a "King and Queen of the Hill" contest that came with a \$700 prize, she signed up.

"I'd never had to fight, but I'd watched it on TV and knew enough that the goal was to hit and not get hit," she said.

Winning that fight set the wheels in motion for what would become her life's passion. At the time, however, she simply saw it as a crazy way to get money and never thought she would fight again.

As she went on to get a master's degree — and later a Ph.D. — in sociology at the University of Kentucky, her mentor suggested she look into women's professional boxing as a thesis topic. There was little academic writing on the subject.

While compiling her research, Halbert boxed on the side for extra money, during a time when competitive amateur boxing



for women was not sanctioned in the United States. She ended her career 5-0, before turning to coaching as she completed her studies.

"I was coaching boxers that no real coaches wanted to work with — women or illegal immigrants or boxers that didn't show immediate promise in Lexington," she said.

In 2000, Halbert returned to Nashville, where she continued training boxers out of her garage. Growing up in an atmosphere where education was highly valued, and realizing in her research that there was not a lot of information to get beginners beyond the gym, she began to write a series of essays to help boxers compete at a higher level. *The Ultimate Boxer: Understanding the Sport and Skills of Boxing*, which she published in 2003, remains the best advanced-instruction manual on the sport.

Halbert worked her way through the USA Boxing certification levels, and after nine years, she became one of the first women to achieve the highest level of coaching certification in USA Boxing. She said the hardest part was networking within the organization as a woman, facing never-ending layers of sexism within the sport.

"A lot of people don't think you're a serious boxing coach if you work with female boxers, and I hope that's changing now," Halbert said.

But even today, with all her accomplishments — including becoming the first U.S. coach ever to work an international boxing camp, and the first woman and first U.S. coach to be invited to serve as an assistant coach and then head coach of the Women's World Championships — some still tell her she is not an elite coach.

The constant battle of being a female coach in the sport also plagued her as she tried to open her own gym in Nashville. But going back to her education roots, she was determined to serve her community and offer a new type of boxing facility.

The Boxing Resource Center officially became a nonprofit organization in 2003, and after years of working out of her garage, Halbert opened in a location off Harding Place. Two years later, the Boxing Resource Center moved to East Nashville, where it continued to expand as a place for men and women of all ages to grow as competitive boxers.

While her newest move may not be in East Nashville, Halbert has gained the confidence and support of her boxers to follow her.

"It's like anything else — people follow you when you're good. She is a destination business," Crowell said. "Christy is just top-of-the-line. She's a phenomenal person, she's a phenomenal trainer, she's so knowledgeable, and she just has this gift."

Halbert's "gift" not only has inspired boxers across Nashville to succeed at the regional, national and international levels, she has also

used her power in and out of the ring to set new goals for women in the sport.

Experiencing the inequality of the sport as a woman firsthand, Halbert knew from the beginning how hard it was to succeed as a female boxer. The more Halbert got involved with the sport, the more she started advocating for changes in USA Boxing so the rules would be equal.

By 2004, she was asking about bringing female boxing to the Olympics, realizing it was one of the few sports that did not include women. A year later, she put in an application for female boxing to be added to the 2008 Olympics, but instead boxing was the only sport that year not to have female competitors.

Halbert was on a mission for change. She continued to heavily campaign for the cause, meeting with people at the international level to change the minds of many about letting female boxers compete in the 2012 Olympic Games in London. By August 2009, her work paid off, as the International Olympic Committee voted to allow women to compete.

Next year's Olympics will feature 10 boxing categories for men and three boxing categories for women. This will mark the first time since the 1904 Olympics in St. Louis — when boxing was just a display event — that female boxers will compete. It will also become the first Olympic Games in history that will include men and women in every sport.

As a result, Halbert said governments around the world are now putting money into the development of women's boxing. One of the most moving moments, she said, was seeing female boxers from countries like Afghanistan, Syria, and Rwanda compete when she served as head instructor for the first-ever Junior and Youth Women's World Championships in Antalya, Turkey, in April.

Halbert's parents, John and Marjorie, traveled to Colorado Springs, Colo., in September to watch their daughter join the ranks of President Gerald Ford, Bonnie Blair and Bud Greenspan as she received the Olympic Torch Award. They said she has always been extremely dedicated and committed to what she believes in.

"She has credentials that very few people in the world have — especially as a woman," her father said. "She has been determined to make boxing available for women and has really stayed with it, and we couldn't be more proud."

Halbert said discrimination is still apparent at the regional, local and national levels, and she plans to continue to educate people about the benefits of women in all sports — not just boxing.

"I'm happy that I have been able to be the voice for women boxers now for a very long time," she said. □P

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Olympic gem Christy Halbert

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