



FLY(WEIGHT) GIRL

Marlen Esparza took home bronze from London in the first Olympics to feature women's boxing

MARLEN ESPARZA WENT TO A BOXING GYM with her brother and ended up talking that gym into letting her train there. She's gone on to win six straight national titles, a gold medal from the 2008 Pan Am Games, a bronze from the 2006 World Championships and, of course, an Olympic bronze medal as a member of Team USA in August.

The 23-year-old flyweight grew up in the Houston area. She talks to **Beau Dure** about her influences—her father, David, was a big fan of Mexican boxing legend Julio César Chávez—and what's next.

"I have an itch that only a gold medal can scratch. I'm definitely going to Rio."

When you were growing up, did you see all kinds of sports or was it mostly boxing?

Actually, it was only boxing. [Julio César] Chávez was beating everybody at that time. So that's what made it all about boxing.

Was Chávez your favorite boxer growing up?

Chávez was the only thing I knew growing up. At the beginning—I'm talking 5 years old, 6 years old—I used to call boxing "Chávez." I would see boxing on TV and say, "Chávez is on! Chávez is on!" But it was just two guys boxing. I used to think boxing and Chávez [were synonymous].

Is it tough to bounce back and forth between the persona of a competitive boxer and who you are outside competition?

Definitely. It's kind of like the real me. Everyone has that little thing inside of them that only they know. My inner voice is a totally different person than who I am. I can't explain it. But when I'm in the ring, I can be me. I can just let loose, like I'm not human. I can do what I want, act like what I want. Even though I'm not speaking, it feels like I'm speaking with my hands, my abilities and movement. I feel like I'm speaking with my body, with my reaction, with my mind. I feel like I'm free.

It's like something is pulled out of me that only boxing can pull out of me.

SCOTT HEANEY/GETTY; TOP: BOB DONNAN/USA TODAY SPORTS; BOTTOM LEFT: SCOTT HEANEY/GETTY IMAGES; BOTTOM RIGHT: JOHN DAVID MEIER/USA TODAY SPORTS

You've won six national championships and boxed in the Olympics, where you won a medal. What's next?

I've been telling everybody I'm going to stop because I thought I was going to stop. But I have an itch that only a gold medal can scratch. So I'm definitely going to go ahead and go to Rio.

Are you going to put off college some more?

I'm still going to go to school. But since I've been blessed with endorsements and a lot of support, I don't have to work. That was the problem: I was working, boxing and going to school. Now I'm just going to be in school and boxing.

I'm also working with Robert Thorne Company, launching an apparel and cosmetics line. I'll also make a boxing doll. I'm going to be in charge of that. It's going to be me and my ideas. I really wanted to do that.

I want people to feel good about themselves and to love themselves, and from there, your heart will lead you in the right direction. That's definitely why I'm so excited about this [product] line.

Do you see yourself as a role model for young Hispanic women?

I do now. At first I was a little intimidated by it. I was aiming for gold, and I was intimidated because I didn't want little girls to be watching, saying, "Oh, well if she can do it, I can do it." And then if I don't do it, they feel like they can't do it. So it scared me. But then as soon as I got home, I realized for me, it was about the gold medal, but for other people, it wasn't about the gold medal. It was about how I made something out of nothing.

Boxer with the bronze: Marlen Esparza falls to Ren Cancan of China in the Olympic semifinal match, right. Cancan ended up with the silver medal.

