

SPOTLIGHT

A great number of us grew up boxing with siblings, imagining our beds as a premiere boxing ring and our sibling as our greatest rival. Elders would never encourage this game though, because a playful tussle could often turn into a full-fledged muscle game.

Then there are those who would often be scolded for misusing the kolbalish (the side pillow) as a tool for shadowboxing, and inventing new varieties of punches every day. Again, this was never encouraged, as parents were worried about the potential injury it might cause us, and more importantly, the pillow.

When I first met Shamima Aktar at the boxing camp of Bangladesh Amateur Boxing Federation, I recalled these memories. Only 19 years old, but you could sense the confidence and courage

in her. Narrowed eyes at the idea of women playing sports, be it football or cricket, is not new, so just imagine the reactions a woman boxer can elicit from the general people. Even though boxing is a very popular sport internationally, in our country we are yet to understand the art of boxing as a sport. Where male boxers are not given much importance, the idea of a woman boxing is a far-off concept for many.

For Shamima Aktar, who has already been able to create a buzz by bagging a number of awards at a very young age, the journey from Jessore to Dhaka Boxing Federation was not an easy one.

Shamima's childhood in Jessore was different from many other girls of her neighborhood - she grew up with football and cricket instead of dolls and other playthings. Growing up, little Shamima would often be found playing different outdoor sports with her male cousins and other boys from the neighbourhood.

READY FOR THE BOUT

FAYEKA ZABEEN SIDDIQUA
PHOTOS: PRABIR DAS

months of coaching, she clinched the title of the Best Boxer and won the gold medal as the champion of the National Women's Boxing Competition 2013 at the junior level. Last December, Shamima won another gold medal at the National Women's Boxing Competition with the title of Best Boxer, and made her debut at the senior level. "My punching power and my body movement have helped me knock down opponents," she says with confidence. Her continuous success and extraordinary performance at such a young age has made her an icon in Bangladesh's female boxing scene. "Since I took part in the women's boxing team of Bangladesh Ansar from the beginning, this year my job with the organisation was made permanent," she says.

Shamima's coach Shafiul Azam Masud believes that shadowboxing is her biggest strength. "Over time, I discovered the maturity and sportsmanship of this little girl," he says.

Shamima says that even though outside the boxing ring her competitors are her friends, once she steps inside the ring, she sees them only as her opponents. "If you lose your focus for a moment or show mercy to your competitor even once, you risk the chance of giving up your shot. Every single well-placed shot means one more point that can take you a long way. It's not only a game of strength and techniques, we have to deal with our emotions as well," she adds with a smile.

Undoubtedly, boxing is a physically demanding sport. "I have been here in the camp with other players for the last five months, practicing for a minimum of six hours every day."

Shamima believes that her hard work would pay off if she could bring the title for her country at the SA Games. But the coach has a more realistic view.

"We are not over optimistic about our women's team winning the trophy as this



"Also, I tended to get into fights with other boys quite often," she laughs. "I guess that too has helped me believe in myself and take up boxing seriously."

Shamima is the only child of her parents, so initially they didn't quite like the idea of her being a boxer. The Jessore Boxing club was very close to her home, and she would go there to see other girls box in the ring. Knowing that her parents would never agree, she walked straight to the club's coach and said that she wanted to be a boxer. "My coach was not convinced then, so he asked me to bring my parents with me."

After hours of trying to convince her reluctant parents, Shamima finally won. The next day she took her mother to the coach, and started doing what she always wanted to do - box.

Since then, Shamima has been extraordinary in every feat. After only five



Shamima Aktar



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is the very first time that they will be participating in an international sports feat, which I think is already an achievement for us," he says.

How are her parents dealing with their daughter's passion, though? "Every time I talk to my mother, she asks me when I am coming home. I am looking forward to bringing pride with me when I go home," she says.

No matter how good you think you are, you can always learn from your seniors, believes Shamima. Shamima is looking forward to playing against Mary Kom, the Olympic winning boxer of India who has



inspired her to continue her boxing journey, and instilled the belief that with determination, she too can be a global champion. "But my role model so to speak is Laila Ali, the retired, undefeated American professional boxer and daughter of Muhammad Ali. I have never seen Laila Ali play but I have heard a lot about her all my life. She has always been my hero and will continue to be so." However, her

inspiration is not limited to global performers. "I always try to learn from other boxers at the camp," Shamima says.

As her coach calls her to get back to the practice matches, Shamima gets up and pauses for a while. "To be a boxer, it is very important that you are strong - both mentally and physically," she says. "Boxing does not have any space for weakness."