

# Down for the Count

**Christy Martin has fallen. The women's boxing world hopes she won't get up.**

By [Rachel Ellner](#) - The Village Voice - Tuesday, Jan 12 1999

Whether for fame, fortune, or in the name of her sport, nearly every female professional boxer has wanted to get her mitts on [Christy Martin](#), "The [Coal Miner's Daughter](#)." Yet Martin's first major loss since she became boxing's most famous and highest-paid female fighter passed as an uneventful occasion, even though the December defeat came at the hands of Sumya Anani, a boxer of questionable skill and reputation.



AP/ Wide World

Beaten and bloodied: Christy Martin, boxing icon

In the early days of boxing, an upset involving a name fighter often propelled the sport to greater heights. John L. Sullivan's loss to [James Corbet](#) signaled the arrival of the modern age of professional boxing. The losses of [Jack Dempsey](#) to [Gene Tunney](#), Max Schemeling to [Joe Louis](#), and [Sugar Ray Robinson](#) to [Randy Turpin](#) served to focus attention on the sweet science and further its appeal. But after a magnificent decade of popularity and unprecedented achievements in women's boxing, Martin's loss indicates something wholly different. "[John Sullivan](#), boxing's first true icon, went out with a

bang," says boxing historian [Herbert G. Goldman](#). "Christy Martin, the first true icon of women's boxing, went out with a whimper."

Martin's defeat drew little sympathy from the female fighting community, much of which has long felt that she needed to be dethroned. The sport is already moving beyond Martin, having won wholehearted devotion among fistic followers in the last three years, primarily through all-female fight cards. "You had action-packed cards that attracted larger and larger audiences who saw an array of talented female boxers with heart," says [Suzanne Riccio-Major](#), who has fought on six all- or predominantly all-women boxing cards in the last year and a half.

Now women's boxing is moving into its next phase, where nearly every major men's fight card includes a women's duel. In the next three months alone, six professional boxing events will feature female fighters, nearly all of whom emerged from their participation on all-women cards. Their names are well known to the converted: Riccio-Major, [Eva Jones-Young](#), [Angela Ramirez](#), [Tracy Byrd](#), Kathy "Wildcat" [Collins](#), [Eileen Lacy](#), [Melissa Salamone](#), [Alicia Ashley](#), Lisa "The Heat" Ested, [Vienna Williams](#), Dawne "The Devastator" George, and Andrea "Sweet Feet" [DeShong](#). While the sun may be finally setting on The Coal Miner's Daughter, the whole of women's boxing continues to dawn.

**Throughout her reign, Martin encouraged the media's penchant for measuring women's boxing by her achievements alone. Since her signing with promoter [Don King](#) in October 1993, the public has been given the mistaken impression that "the pool of talent is so shallow there aren't enough women fighters to provide sparring partners for Christy Martin," as *Sports Illustrated* put it in April 1996. If truth be told, there have been women boxers who could have knocked Martin off her block as far back as 1728, when [Elizabeth Wilkinson](#) and Ann Field duked it out in one of the earliest recorded women's bouts.**

**But Martin made sure she appeared unbeatable, refusing to take on competent challengers. "She hasn't fought anyone who is anyone," says boxing promoter [Diane Fisher](#). "There would have been plenty of talent for Christy Martin if she'd wanted it." She also ducked the all-women fight cards, dismissing them as "sort of a sex thing." To this, Frank "Frankie G" Globuschutz, president of the International Women's Boxing Federation, responds, "She just didn't want to be judged against 12 other women. The only competition she was willing to go up against . . . was usually a mannequin."**

**Now that she's been knocked off her perch, Martin's only chance to cash in on her fame is to fight those very top-ranked boxers she has so studiously avoided. Such a matchup could signal the emergence of a new standard bearer for the sport— a much hoped-for outcome. "It will be a sign of relief," says Sweet Feet DeShong. "At least now we'll have someone who can be a representative for women's boxing." DeShong's preference is for the loquacious and finely skilled Wildcat Collins, because "her mouth will run not just for women, but for the art of boxing."**

**Martin has often appalled the female fighting community (and its potential sponsors) with her femme fatale antics, unabashed statements of "Christy is for Christy" (and not for women's boxing), and relentless gay-bashing. This is the sort of low-class behavior that women's boxing has consciously tried to transcend. (It's no coincidence that women's boxing has gained unprecedented popularity during the current ear-biting era of men's fighting.)**

**Martin's lesbian-baiting has largely been used as a way of avoiding or intimidating the competition. Many of her well-known gibes have been directed at DeShong, who defeated Martin twice before she signed with King. One recent scene had Martin screaming, "Get this dyke off our car! Get this dyke off my car!" when DeShong playfully attempted to join Martin in her convertible at the [Boxing Hall of Fame](#) parade last year.**

Martin might have continued to dominate the limelight had it not been for her purse demands and contract disputes with King. The fright wigcoiffed promoter has a way of letting his boxers know when their time is up. With Martin, he matched her up against the dirty-fighting Anani, who elbowed and shouldered her way to a 10-round majority decision. "There's no boxing skill you can use against Anani," says DeShong, who lost to Anani in March. "She flogs you to death like a chicken: beak, wings, feet, and hands. I couldn't use any constructive method to fight her within the art of boxing." King later signed a contract with Anani, negotiating the deal while her fight with Martin was still going on.

Martin's loss to Anani was reminiscent of heavyweight [Jimmy Young's](#) loss to Ozzie "Jaws" Ocasio in 1978. Young, who also annoyed King, needed to be taught a lesson. King arranged this by having him fight Ocasio, a real spoiler who knew precisely how to unravel Young. "King is poison to fighters he has under contract who give him trouble," says Goldman, who has been on the Don King watch since the promoter's ascent to power. King, who currently has 14 women professionals under contract, will certainly save money on Martin, whose purses are said to be up to 10 times more than those of her opponents.

Though Martin can be credited with bringing coverage to women's boxing at a time when people were squeamish about seeing women in the ring, Martin desecrated the sport in other ways. "The lesson of Christy Martin," says [Frankie G Globuschutz](#), "is don't separate yourself from the pack. If the public holds you up as a superstar, OK. But Martin tried to say she was holding the sport up, and she was proved absolutely wrong."

Globuschutz thinks in practical terms— dollars and sense— about the future of women's boxing. In the past, the sport was primarily fueled by bursts of inspiration and individuals' personal savings accounts. Then, the all-women cards— which Frankie G usually had a hand in organizing— helped bring it to new heights. Devoted fans would travel hundreds of miles to attend the matches, much like followers of the [Grateful Dead](#) once did. These collaborative efforts were started essentially as a response to the obstacles presented by Martin.

Now women's boxing is achieving increasing media fanfare and female fighters are able to display their skill and wit on the same canvas as men. Though she served as the sport's figurehead during its rise, that emergence came about largely in spite of Christy Martin, not because of her.

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