

Naomi's boxing clever

WOMEN are finally being recognised for their boxing and martial-arts skills but many people believe ladies ought not to spar, let alone, bob, weave — and, heaven forbid — connect. Talents like Kerry girl Naomi O'Brien have blossomed, regardless.

"I was in fifth class when I started tae kwon-do (a Korean martial art). All my school friends in Tralee were doing it, and that got me interested," says Naomi, 16. "And in a few years I'd taken up kick-boxing, and then boxing to work on my hands. And I got to really like it ... and the competitions."

"There were no girls in the first boxing club I joined, so I had to train with the lads. It brought me on and we became good friends," she says. "It was a few months before another girl joined. But then, a few more followed. That was great. Maybe we persuaded them."

With hard-earned experience in a few codes, Naomi has quite a record in the ring. "How many fights have I had? About 180," she says. In a kick-boxing competition she can easily have a flurry of bouts on the same day, so fitness is crucial.

"Every morning, I'm out for a run before school," she says. "And my dad and I do jogs and sprints. Then, straight away after class, there's another session. So, all in all, yeah, I'd say about three hours a day." Her willingness to sacrifice for her sport is impressive.

What about pastimes? "No, not a whole lot," she says. "There just isn't time. Especially when there's a competition coming. You've got to put in the effort. If you don't, you'll be found out. Of course, there's always a fear of what could happen if you don't train right. On the day, you've got to be able to say you tried your very best."

Considering Naomi's success — a European title in tae kwon-do, three Irish titles in amateur boxing, and three world titles in kick-boxing — she knows what she's talking about. Her father Mike, her trainer, has been there through everything. He is her

She's fluent in a few styles, but this feisty kick boxer's dream is to take part in the next Olympics, says **David Young**

number one motivator.

Naomi says: "I couldn't imagine anyone else coaching me. It just wouldn't be the same. I get so nervous before fights. And my dad calms me down. It's his voice in my ear that tells me everything's going to be okay. And once the bell goes, I'm fine. But he's the one for my corner. He's always there."

Mike introduced her to the sport, bringing her along as a primary school student to her first session. Having had experience from his younger days, Mike jumped in to encourage Naomi. Ever since, there's been no turning back — for either of them.

At last year's World Kick-boxing Championships in Spain, where Naomi won an unprecedented third title, Mike also picked up a gold medal.

Even though Naomi had fought brilliantly and come through her own competition, unscathed, she couldn't help but be anxious while dad followed suit.



Listowel boxer Naomi O'Brien and her father, Mike O'Brien.
Pictures: Dominick Walsh

"I'm always worried when he's in competition," she says. "I fear for him getting hurt. Sometimes, I even cry through his bouts. I just don't want anything to go wrong." Yet, Naomi remains undaunted by the prospects of injury to herself. "I've had a few bloody noses alright ... but never a broken one."

In September this year, she'll try her hand in the adult category at the Kick Boxing World Championships. Not only is she up against older fighters, she's also meeting them in full contact. Ratcheting up the intensity won't throw her, though. It's a natural next step, she says.

But what's the dream? "The Olympics in 2016," she says. "I want to concentrate on making it."

For a young fighter with the right skills and a keen focus, you wouldn't bet against her. "Every few Saturdays, we go to Dublin to train," she says. This inclusion in 'elite' team sessions is standing to her.

"I've sparred with Christina McMahon — Ireland's only professional boxer. And that taught

me a lot," she says, proud to have stood in the ring with one of her idols.

The Monaghan pro, 20 years Naomi's senior, has the kind of flinty ambition that all true competitors appreciate. McMahon, too, makes no excuses or apologies for what she does. With her haul

of medals, why would she?

Being a teenager has shielded Naomi from the antiquated notions that girls and women should refrain from contact sports. Luckily, she's encountered only praise from family and friends, and her school teachers echo those sentiments (by announcing her

achievements over the school tannoy). She has arrived as the mould's being broken.

In the UK, the BBC aired their first televised female boxing broadcast in Nov 2010, less than two years ahead of women's boxing debut on the Olympic stage. Even since Naomi began boxing, the number of registered female boxers in Britain has risen from 70, in 2005, to more than 900, in 2009, according to a survey conducted by Sport England.

Come to think of it — women's boxing was only officially sanctioned in the UK in Naomi's lifetime. And today, there are more than 20,000 putting on gloves — every week. Why? For the challenge. The sense of self-esteem. The desire to be able to defend oneself. The fitness and feel-good factors. To win. All the things any athlete wants.

Most importantly, Naomi stands beautifully, and blithely, uninterested in those who 'tut tut.' They may save their breath. For a young fighter who's acquitted herself in the ring with Katie Taylor, O'Brien's very much her own person.

Training diet advice

Eating little, and often, works best for your metabolism. So, it's OK to snack between meals. Think low-GI fruit: apples, grapefruit and berries.

Keep fat out of your pre- and post-workouts. It'll only slow down your digestion, and your recovery, too. Opt for proteins, instead.

If fat loss is the goal, then cut down on your carbohydrates (don't cut them out). And, keep in mind, any carbs eaten ought to be earned through intense training.

Try not to drink your calories: jet-tison soft drinks and limit your milk

intake. Water's a winner. But do drink one or two cups of black coffee up to one hour before your work-out — it'll boost your metabolism and burn fat while you exercise.

Avoid the 'white' stuff — rice, flour, refined sugar — they're all starchy foods. And they metabolise readily into fat. Eat nothing a couple of hours before bed. Hard, but a good night's sleep is priceless.

Mike O'Brien
(kick-boxer and trainer of Naomi)

I was all over the shop

LONLY look at my bank-account balance at the end of the month, when, about to indulge myself with a new purchase, the ATM refuses to make a delightful whirring sound (the 'I'm getting your cash for you right this second' one). It spits my card back, with no lolly. This prompts a panicked internet-banking check to confirm my suspicions ... I've run out of money, again. After a little self-flagellation and a few days of baked-bean-eating frugality, I'm back to my profligate ways.

Last month, something changed. The ATM refused to play ball two weeks before pay-day and that forced me to look at my spending. I don't live in a flashy apartment; I don't eat out much; I don't take lavish holidays, and I don't have a gambling problem — so where was my cash? My overflowing wardrobe provided the answer — I was a shopaholic.

My addiction had started insidiously — nipping out on my lunch break and coming back with a Zara bag, or treating myself in my favourite high-street haunts (Topshop, New Look, French Connection, and even Reiss) every time I had a date/event/party to attend. A mid-afternoon slump was alleviated by an online browse. Placing an order on ASOS was a cinch; with next-day delivery if you spent over £100, it seemed silly not to order several things and send back what I didn't need. I kept them all. I bought whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted. I'm not talking Chanel handbags or Erdem dresses, but still, my little habit was adding up to hundreds of euro each month (fine if you are Tamara Ecclestone, not so good if you are a lowly journalist on a pitiful wage in a city where my annual rent could buy me a nuclear weapon in Iran).

My out-of-control spending was subject to the law of diminishing marginal returns. The more things I bought, the quicker I became bored with them and wanted

I spent my cash on bags, shoes and clothes. I'm a shopaholic but I've come 'clean' now, swears **Katy Harrington**



Self-confessed shopaholic Katy Harrington: "I bought whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted."

Picture: Dan Linehan

something new. With a wardrobe full of clothes, many unworn, I still complained I had nothing. The vicious circle was complete. The apogee was when I arrived home with a grey marl jumper, from Zara, to discover I already owned it. I was ashamed of my vapid, costly habit. It was time for a radical change. I set myself a simple challenge — one month (which ironically fell during Lent) without spending a penny on clothing, accessories, or (deep breath) shoes. Not a €5.99 t-shirt from H&M, not a €90 pair of boots from Dune, and nothing in between. I was going cold turkey.

For a shopaholic, temptation is everywhere and working close to a shopping mecca is not easy. Avoiding the shops was one thing, but an email appeared in my inbox from my old pals at Urban Outfitters: '50% off all spring essentials declared'. Resistance seemed futile and I decided I couldn't live without a new Kimchi & Blue printed button front playsuit which, at £48, was a steal. The 'proceed to checkout' button required one little click, but the disapproving Ed-

die Hobbs-like face of my conscience said 'don't do it.' It took all my strength to deny myself, but I cleared the first hurdle and felt relief, not the usual buyer's remorse.

I went through my inbox and started unsubscribing — no more emails from Net-a-porter, so long Asos and their free-delivery deals, and farewell Topshop's 'style updates', which all have one goal, to make weanklings like me part with their cash. After a shop-free few weeks, I was spending my lunch on park benches reading, rather than frantically trying on dresses in the changing rooms at Mango. Was I cured? Were my spending habits now normal?

According to a 2010 report from Mintel, Irish people are 'average' buyers of clothing. We spend no more than €30 to €74 on any area of clothing (there are seven categories) per year. Basing an estimate on the top spender, we spend €40 per month on clothes. No offence to Mintel, but lumping men and women together is a mistake.

Most men I know buy a shirt

and a pair of jeans once in a blue moon, whereas I often receive panicked emails from female friends containing links to pictures of €400 French Connection dresses and a message along the lines of: 'Should I order this NOW? I have no money but have just been asked out on a date? If I order in the next 25 seconds it will be here by Friday'. Their stats don't show the full picture.

To prove Mintel wrong, I conducted my own, highly unscientific poll. I asked 20 women (aged from their mid-20s to late 60s, some working, some self-described 'doleys') what they spend per month on clothes, shoes and fashion accessories. With the exception of a few highs and lows (the highest spender was €500 per month, the lowest €40), the average was €200 per month. That's a recession figure — one woman in her 50s who works part-time said that in 'the good old days' she was spending €200 upwards on clothes every month, and is now spending €70, still miles over Mintel's estimates. Sarah Murphy, a 29-year-old living and working full-time in Dublin, said her purchases included "one big-ticket item every other month, plus bits here and there," all adding up to €300 per month. This would have been higher had she included make-up, beauty products or a trip to the hairdressers. So my old habits were far from extreme, but over the last few months, I'm proud to say, my spend was a big, fat zero and I'm determined to keep it that way until I genuinely need something new, and that, I estimate, will be circa 2013. Until then, charity shops and cast-offs will have to suffice.

Just the other day, I passed what I fondly refer to as my ex-crackden, the high street mammoth that is Zara. There, in the window, a beautiful, navy silk polka-dot shirt. I stopped, admired, sighed, and walked on, because, for this ex-shopaholic, spending like it's going out of fashion just did.



SEÁN MONCRIEFF
ON *wednesday*

No one person's 'the Boss' of the rules we all live by

BRUCE Springsteen said Dublin this week, and, beforehand, there were dire warnings that what happened to him in London better not happen here. In a gig at Hyde Park — which, typically, was a leg-testing three hours — 'the Boss' topped things off by introducing Paul McCartney on stage and launching into a number of Beatles songs.

But, after a rather jolly version of *Twist and Shout*, the twisting and shouting came to an abrupt end: the concert organisers turned off Springsteen's microphone.

The reason? Even Springsteen isn't the boss of the Hyde Park sound regulations — which stipulate that concerts must end at 10.30pm. There was much fury from (largely middle-aged) fans, band members, and various commentators about the sudden halt to the concert: 'jobs-poopers' and 'buzzkill' were among the most popular cliché deployed.

And they are correct to be angry. They should be furious. Because this goes to the heart of any debate about fairness in a society.

The plug wasn't pulled on Springsteen at 10.30pm. He'd overrun the curfew by half an hour when he introduced McCartney — and, according to news reports, Springsteen had been warned about the curfew in advance.

And it wasn't in place because of some anti-fun philosophy, but because people live in the vicini-

ty of Hyde Park: people with kids and lives and jobs to get up to the next morning.

Granted, this isn't an outrage like bailing out banks, but the criticism concentrated on the 'rights' of the crowd and ignored those of the people who live there.

Implicit were ideas that this rule was 'boring' and, therefore, deserving of contempt and that Bruce is rock 'royalty' and, therefore, shouldn't have to abide by them anyway, man.

Given that much of Springsteen's work consists of protest songs decrying how the little man/woman is exploited by the powerful, one could point to a little inconsistency in him expecting to be above rules that inconvenience those 'little people'.

But, more appositely, it demonstrates how we human beings are quixotically inconsistent when it comes to regulation.

In theory, we are all in favour of a fair society and the rules that bring that about. But, in practice, we'd much rather if those rules suited us personally. We'd all like top-notch public services, but we'd rather not pay more tax. We give out about clamping and speed limits and health-and-safety regulations, and a million other little inconveniences, as if they were thought up just to make our lives unpleasant.

This is not to say that all rules are consistent or logical; but they are part of a general attempt to make life as fair as possible for all of us; which means that, in part, we get what we want, and, at other times, we get a pain in the ass. Even if it's the ass of rock royalty.