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May 13, 2010 Thursday

Geometry teacher pulls no punches ; She's also at home in boxing ring

BYLINE: Dan Lawton Contributing writer

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The line of spectators waiting outside the Freret Street Gym snaked down the sidewalk and past Sarita's Grill. The cozy Mexican joint was sprinkled with customers, but the back was vacant except for a coterie of boxers and trainers hunkered around a table.

The crew was stereotypically tough-looking, a mix of grizzled old-timers and muscled amateurs, except for the figure in the hub of attention, who stuck out amid the macho tableau.

Slim, with a frizzy head of nut-brown hair piled into a bun, Annie McBride is not your typical boxer. In her ring outfit, a bright yellow tank top and black trunks, she looks like she belongs in high-school gym class. Then there are her glasses. They are small, black-framed ovals that sit half way down the bridge of her nose giving her the appearance of a school teacher. Oddly enough, when not dodging punches and sticking jabs, she is one.

An advanced math and geometry instructor at Mount Carmel Academy, McBride, 25, grew up in Houston, where she ran track and played softball. She enrolled in Loyola University in 2003 and first popped into the Freret Street Gym to get some exercise with friends. A self-proclaimed thrill seeker, she caught the eye of trainer James Joseph and began to work out under his guidance in January of 2009.

"People said, if you want to know how to fight, that's the guy," McBride said about Joseph, who has been training fighters for more than 30 years. Joseph remembers how before he met McBride, he saw her in the background while taping another fighter and immediately felt a connection.

"I could tell she knew what was up," he said.

In September of 2009, McBride fought her first match and won by decision. Three consecutive victories made her a rising star and she headed into her Freret Street match with an unblemished record of 4-0. Her opponent, Jennifer Fuchs, an LSU student, also was undefeated and said she has Olympic aspirations. Women's boxing will be featured for the first time at the London Olympics in 2012, and has recently undergone an increase in popularity in the professional ranks as well.

McBride said that while she draws inspiration from professional female fighters, including Lucia Rijker, the Dutch boxer and martial arts champion dubbed "the most dangerous woman in the world," she doesn't have professional aspirations.

"I would never go pro. I would never take the headgear off. My most prized talent is my intelligence, that's what I value the most," she said while getting her fists taped before heading into the gym alongside her crew.

Weaving through the crowd, she found quiet in a makeshift women's locker room, where she warmed up by shadowboxing.

Outside, the crowd was thick and hot, with only a pair of industrial-size floor fans to cool spectators. McBride was the second women's fight on the card and as she limbered up, the first two women squared off.

A minute in, one landed a fierce jab and blood began to ooze from the other's nose. When the bell rang signifying the end of the fight, her face was awash in crimson. Undaunted, she shook her hips to the blaring rap music as her gloves were removed.

One fight left to wait for Annie McBride, and she spent the fleeting moments before her match throwing series after series of lighting-fast jabs into the air and taking in Joseph's final instructions. Then, with two trainers and fellow boxer Geni Taylor at her side, she strode to the ring.

"Ladies and gentleman, in the blue corner, Annie 'the fighting school teacher' McBride!" the announcer barked.

The fight began. Virginia Fuchs cracked McBride with a stiff jab and the two traded blows. Fuchs, a southpaw, was getting the best of McBride.

Leather smacked on flesh. Fists thrust like pistons. The round ended. The second began.

Annie McBride's face was beet-red and her bun bobbed up and down at the rear of her headgear after every punch. Every time she found an opening, Fuchs closed it and found one of her own. McBride took her first loss with a stiff lip and descended the ring toward the locker room.

A week later, she was calculating the area of a parallelogram in a 10th-grade geometry class at Mount Carmel.

McBride wore her glasses, looking as bookish as ever, and bantered effortlessly with the teenage girls, guiding them through internal tangents, isosceles trapezoids and rhombuses. She created a word problem that involved calculating the distance at which a pair of teenage sweethearts sit from a French Quarter water fountain.

"Do you think math is romantic?" one student asked with a giggle.

"I'm in love with it," she said.

The students know their teacher is a boxer and joke about it. "I have a geometry teacher that can kick butt," sophomore Malika Howard said.

They say she's cool and relay how she broke into the dance step "the jerk" at a recent school picnic and has given herself the nickname D.J. Multiplicative.

With her first loss behind her, McBride appeared ready to get back in the gym. "I knew I had lost that match as soon as it started," she said, admitting nerves were a factor. "But it helped me realize that I was making mistakes. I was dropping my hands and I had never fought a southpaw before."

The Stick and Move Gym on South Derbigny and Erato streets is where McBride trains. It's a warehouse, half of which is full of clutter, the other half where Joseph holds court.

On a steamy Wednesday afternoon, the sun crashed through the skylights, reflecting off the exposed brick wall as a pair of fighters slugged it out on the heavy bags while two others shadow boxed in the ring. In the foreground, Annie McBride skipped nimbly over a near-invisible jump rope as it whirled around her body, stopping briefly to chat with her coach.

Joseph, who works as a security guard on the Steamboat Natchez at night, makes little money from his amateur boxing training, but said he was influenced to give back to the community by the charity work of his cousin, Eva Dykes.

Joseph oversees more than 15 fighters and runs through their backgrounds. His one female pro, Geni Taylor, has lost close to 100 pounds since she started boxing and recently won her professional debut in a 35-second TKO. There's also a Moldavian immigrant who works as a valet, an NOPD officer and a young man whose father was shot just down the street several years ago.

Joseph, whose father taught him to fight at the age of 5, graduated from Booker T. Washington High School. "We had those big horsehair gloves then," he said. "Sometimes they would hurt more than getting punched."

Joseph said he thinks McBride has the potential to make it to the Olympics, and it's not a prediction that she completely shies away from.

"We'll see where the amateurs take me," she said. "I like boxing a lot and I like my boxing family, but I feel like I'm a teacher before anything else. I truly believe that's what I'm meant to do."

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Dan Lawton is a contributor to The Times-Picayune.

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