





# GLADIATORS



# READY!

We talk to the new female Gladiators of the smash hit BBC TV show to discover their fitness secrets, and find out more about the women behind the iconic red and blue costumes

Words: Joanna Ebsworth

**ATHENA**  
aka Karenjeet  
Kaur Bains

**A**s Athena, the Greek goddess of war and wisdom, I have all the characteristics of being strong and powerful. I can deadlift 175kg, bench press 100kg, squat 150kg and I'm a Commonwealth champion powerlifter as well as the Guinness World Record holder for doing the most bodyweight squats in a minute. But I'm also fast and agile, thanks to my athletics background. I did athletics for a period of 10 years until I transitioned into power lifting at the age of 17, and I'm a former three-time sprinting champion for Warwickshire.

'Having speed and strength is a lethal combination, but I've also got brains as an ACA chartered accountant. I'm always trying to outsmart the contenders and be one step ahead without giving anything away, so I try to remain calm and composed – even when nervous or psyching myself up to compete in front of 3,000 people at the Utilita Arena Sheffield. I'm all about being aggressive yet focused when it comes to getting into action, and channelling my athletic mindset helps me to go out there and perform at my best while managing the adrenaline rush.

'I really enjoy the strength-related games such as Gauntlet, where I get to use my battering ram to literally smash contenders down. I've always had very strong upper-body strength and regularly do weighted pull-ups. In fact, having that strong upper-body strength – which I've developed over many, many years – has transitioned really well into being a Gladiator.

'I also love Powerball. Being able to get really physical with the contenders by blocking and tackling them gives me the chance to showcase my agility. As a power lifter, I know people have certain expectations of me, but I love to break barriers and surpass expectations. To this day, I train with my dad in our home gym, and we're always evolving and adapting my training to my next goal. My training became more functional in the lead up to filming *Gladiators* and, while I still worked with heavy weights, we increased my reps and volume to

build lung capacity and give me the ability to run after contenders in any direction.

'I feel like I've been born and bred to be a Gladiator. It's such an honour and a win, not only for me, but for my whole family. I'm South Asian and, coming from a diverse and minority background, I love breaking stigmas because South Asian women don't stereotypically get involved in strength sports. I love smashing those glass ceilings and being an inspiration and a role model for the next generation, especially for any women who have been denied opportunities in sport. I almost feel like a flame bearer leading the way to hopefully open the floodgates. I like to empower women and give them the wings to fly.'

**'I'M FAST AND AGILE, THANKS TO MY ATHLETICS BACKGROUND'**





**SABRE**  
aka Shelli McCoy

trained in multiple sports over the years, and some of those sports really give way to me generating a lot of power, strength, flexibility and co-ordination. When I went to do my fitness test, I already had everything the production crew needed from me to be a Gladiator, and that came from 15 years of training in various sports and showing up daily. I've been a CrossFit athlete for 10 years – competing for five or six years – and I've been an Olympic weightlifter. I've also been the champion and number one in the country in both sports simultaneously, so I'm an all-rounder and I can perform well in any *Gladiators* event. The production team could place me anywhere, and I wasn't scared of the physical-contact games. I have no fear, so it was easy for them to put me up against contenders and say, "Sabre, get them to the ground". I played around on the rings for Hang Tough because it's all about swinging in different directions and that's not something we do in CrossFit. I also had to learn how to tackle because I've never done any contact sports before. But apart from that, the rest of my training stayed the same.

'I don't think there are words to describe the magnitude of how proud I feel about inspiring a new generation to get into fitness. But what I would say is that if this was it for me, then my life's been worth something. I feel there's no better way for one human to make an impact on the world than to offer other humans something to live for, or some purpose to strive for. To show people it's possible to follow something that could be your dream. There's nothing better than that.'

**S**abre is a fierce female, supporting females being fun, but also being unapologetically athletic. And I think that comes from the fact that I've always been a little bit larger than life. I've always been a little bit wild and sassy. But ultimately, I've always been driven as an athlete.

'Being "unapologetically athletic" has been a motto of mine since I was 10 years old. My mum was a sergeant in the army, so she's a strong, independent woman. She always said to me, "do what you want to do". She told me to always take up space and celebrate my achievements, so I never apologise for my successes when I've worked hard for them.

'Being a Gladiator is about being at the pinnacle of fitness and athleticism. To do that, you need years of training behind you to develop all the different elements of fitness you need, such as stamina, agility, muscle power and endurance. I've

**FIRE** aka Montell Douglas

**F**ire is extremely fierce because she never holds back – just like me, because I always give 100 per cent all of the time. Her determination is her best attribute. Just when you think her light is going out, she comes back, and keeps coming back.

'My physical power is one of my biggest strengths. People underestimate me because of my frame. I've got really long levers, but I try to utilise them as best I can by generating a lot of force with them. That said, I think my biggest strength is my resilience, and that comes from competing internationally for 20 years. I'm a history maker as the first woman to compete in both the Summer and Winter Olympics – first as sprinter, and then in the bobsleigh – so I've had to overcome lots of different injuries throughout my career and adapt my sport at different times of my life. But that journey has given me the



inner strength I need to be a Gladiator.

'Being a Gladiator is a hard task. We might make it look easy, but that's because we're all sports stars coming from different sporting backgrounds. We've done the work, and we have the mental and emotional strength to go one-on-one with a contender and never quit. We also need to be able to put on a show, connect with the audience and inspire a nation. It's great to inspire so many kids, but as the oldest female Gladiator (I've just turned 38), I also want to be that voice for those who think it's too late to start something new or get fit. I believe you can do anything you want to. You've just got to find your inner Gladiator and, as long as you're giving 100 per cent, you'll shock yourself in terms of what you can achieve.

'Being one of the fastest British women of all time, I'm very explosive. So, I was always looking forward to trying Powerball, even though I had to work on my agility because I've been running in a straight line for many years! I was surprised that Duel was one of my best events, and I had a lot of fun trying all the games and learning different techniques. Doing Hang Tough felt incredible!

'I definitely upped my training before filming, exercising six days a week for three-to-four hours so I had the endurance to film for 10 days back-to-back. I didn't take my role as a female Gladiator lightly. There's something so beautiful and genuine and empowering about being a strong woman and just owning it. My fellow female Gladiators and I are owning our beauty and our grace, as well as our fierceness, and we're unapologetic for being absolute bosses. We're doing it, and we're doing it with a smile.'



**D**ynamite is small but mighty. The vibe I like to give off to contenders outside of the games is friendly and gentle, but once the referee blows the whistle to start the game, it's like a switch goes off inside me and I explode. Dynamite is an amplified version of me because I'm very bubbly and friendly and chatty, but my family will tell you there's a reason why I do well in competition.

'I'm naturally competitive and I don't like to lose. But I like to think I show good sportsmanship because, when I do lose, I lose gracefully. I started swimming at the age of seven and swam competitively at national level until I was 15. Afterwards, I tried lots of activities to find out what I liked, including athletics and hockey. But then I found CrossFit and I've been doing that at an elite level ever since. Swimming obviously gave me great core fitness, endurance and massive shoulders, but CrossFit gave me strength, power, speed, the adaptability to approach each Gladiator event with an open mind and to be switched on all the time, because you never know what event you'll be doing next in CrossFit.

'My favourite events by far are Duel and The Wall. I'm quite short at 5'5", but I've got a low centre of gravity which is very helpful for maintaining balance, and I'm also pretty powerful. Getting in the right mindset was crucial to us all performing at our best, and there was a variety of things we Gladiators did to achieve that. We'd hype each other up with dancing, fist bumps and belly bouncing off each other while music blasted out, and it definitely got us in the zone. There was one occasion when Diamond and I were getting ready backstage to do The Wall together and we were singing *Power* by Little Mix so loudly our throats hurt!

'I was 20 years old when we filmed *Gladiators* and, as the youngest, I had no idea what it was all about. Being a Gladiator had never crossed my mind because I didn't know it existed! But the reaction has been so amazing, and my friends think it's really cool even though they hadn't seen the original series either. I love that little kids are looking up to me. I want to show people that I'm balancing my university life, social life, Gladiator life and sporting life. I'm doing it all and proving you can do anything if you put your mind to it. I'm also proud to show that fit doesn't look one way. All eight of us female Gladiators look completely different, and I think that's such an important message to put out there. It's a hard world we live in, and social media is a powerful thing that can be hard to ignore. But we want to show women that as long as you feel good in yourself, that's all that really matters.'



**DIAMOND** aka Livi Sheldon

**'I'M THE KIND OF PERSON WHO WILL TAKE ON ANY CHALLENGE – AND GIVE IT 110 PERCENT'**

**D**iamond is extremely strong, super versatile, very powerful and completely unbreakable. I've been made under extreme pressure, just like a diamond – not just from years of sporting competition, but also from being bullied for years as a youngster. But that's helped to create the strong, powerful woman I am today, and I want to inspire other girls to be strong and powerful as well.

'I was incredibly sporty from a young age and pretty much tried every sport going. I was a footballer, a county-level high jumper and a swimmer before I moved into bodybuilding. And that makes me a very versatile Gladiator because I can turn my hand to any event I like, bringing all the strength and power but also speed and agility. Being six foot tall definitely gives me an advantage because my height puts the contenders under pressure. My stare has become quite a "thing", and I think it unnerves people when I look down into their eyes, especially during Duel.

'I definitely have my favourite events, but Duel is an amazing one to be a part of because it's very challenging and you need a lot of mental strength to get up there and take someone down. But I'm built for it. I'm the kind of person who will take on any challenge – and give it 110 percent. And if I can't do something straight away, you can bet I'll go away and be able to do it the next week. Diamond is an extension of me, so it's all about getting into a confident mindset and thinking strategically about every single thing I'm doing – even when my strategies sometimes don't come into play – because you can never tell what your contenders are going to do.

'My training definitely became a lot more intense in the build up to filming *Gladiators*. As a bodybuilder, I only did bodybuilding training, so I had to bring a lot more functionality to my workouts. I took up CrossFit gymnastics, started climbing weekly, and I brought in some agility and speed work with sprinting and hill sprints. Oh, and I put some rugby tackling in there, too.

'I think the best thing about being a Gladiator is being able to go into the arena and play all the games. It's honestly like an adult playground! I'm extremely competitive, not just with others but with myself as well, so I always want to be the best. I always want to shine bright, show my power and be unbreakable. Professionally, I would say the best thing – apart from inspiring the next generation to embrace fitness – is inspiring all the women out there to see you can be strong and muscular but feminine and sassy as well. That feels really good, and I'm very grateful for the opportunity.'





**ELECTRO**  
aka Jade Packer



**E**lectro is the perfect mix of speed and strength, and she's cool, calm and collected with a resting game face. But underneath all that she is an unstoppable force to be reckoned with. She's just like lightning, because you never know when – or how hard – she's going to strike!

'I started off as a sprinter, so that gave me speed and conditioning, but then I moved into bodybuilding and that gave me my strength and physique. Bodybuilding taught me what hard work really is because you need to lead a very regimented lifestyle if you want to achieve anything. However, I soon realised I didn't just want to look good – I wanted to be physically fit, too. I knew I had athletic ability from my sprinting days, so I made the move into more functional training with CrossFit.

'CrossFit has allowed me to refine lots of new skills in gymnastics, and enhance my engine so I can push for long periods of time while using my speed and strength. I always say the CrossFit athlete is a "jack of all trades, master of none". It makes you a great all-rounder, and that has served me well as a Gladiator. My favourite game is Powerball because it's super-fast paced. I'd never had any experience of contact sports before, but I loved it! The game is only a minute long, but a lot can happen in that minute, and it honestly makes you feel alive.

'Getting to embody a superhuman character is seriously cool. I'm one of 16 Gladiators, and the bond we've built is something I will cherish forever. It's a rare thing to get 16 people together who blend so seamlessly. Obviously, we all had to audition to prove we could do what we said we could do, and the fitness trials were extremely tough. But it was also a lot of fun – like a massive adult sports day!

'The crowd really helps to charge you up and get you in the right mindset. But so do our individual entrances. We all have our own walkout songs and signature moves that help us embody our character and get in the zone. It's like, "Here I am, this is what I'm about. Boom!". It was so cute to see girls who looked a bit like me doing my moves. I hope they can look at me and relate.

'Every sport I've ever done has been inspired by watching other people in action. So, I really value having the ability to be that person for a new generation. It's super important because, without seeing a potential blueprint, you don't know what's possible; you can't think, "That could be me, too". As Electro would say, everyone needs a chance to "light up the world" in their own way.'

**COMET** aka Ella-Mae Rayner

**C**omet is an extension of me because she encompasses my personality, skillset, fearlessness and competitive background from gymnastics, diving and cheerleading. I've trained in very acrobatic sports, and that explains why Comet is a bit of a shooting star.

'You could say I'm slightly different to the other female Gladiators in that I'm very poised and I'm a bit of a perfectionist. In gymnastics, I was told off if my knees were bent or my toes weren't pointed, so I'm very big on execution. I'm not just about winning but winning in style. Win or lose, I'll shake the contender's hand.



'My flexibility is one of my biggest strengths. Obviously, I needed to tick the strength box as a Gladiator, but my flexibility gives me the hip mobility to get my legs up higher on The Wall or wrap my legs around contenders during Hang Tough and take them down.

'In addition to my regular six-days-a-week strength workouts, I went to my local climbing wall to prepare for *Gladiators*, did a bit of CrossFit to up my aerobic capacity. I think my gymnastics background gives me the discipline to do whatever I need to do to succeed and ensure I get my training done. Even on the days when I don't feel like training, I do it because I know it's for the greater good. My family and friends will tell you I've always been disciplined and dedicated, but that's what sport has taught me. Training for *Gladiators* gave me a goal, and that made a nice change from training to tick a box.

'I love strength training, and I've done it ever since I sustained my first ankle injury (I've injured both of them). I wanted to be a stuntwoman after gymnastics, but my whole world was turned upside down when my surgeons told me I'd never be able to do high-impact sport again. I gained a lot of weight, was very unhappy and didn't know where my life was going. The only thing I could do at that point was to get in the gym, lift weights properly, go on a weight-loss journey and become stronger and fitter. But going to the gym became my escape, and I started my online coaching business to help women who were in the same position I used to be in. Turning everything around and becoming a Gladiator is one of the best feelings ever.'

Photography: BBC Pictures

womensfitness.co.uk

**FURY**  
aka Jodie Ounsley

'Fury and I both have two sides. When I'm in a competitive mindset, I'm very aggressive, and I own it as well. You won't see me smiling! But I'm a very warm person once the game's over and the adrenaline's worn off. I love lifting people up, giving them a hug and congratulating them on their game. Many people perceive contact sports to be aggressive, but that couldn't be further from the truth. Rugby is a team sport, so it's all about the camaraderie, having each other's backs, sharing the same goal and supporting each other - just like us Gladiators.

'My rugby background has helped me quite a lot as a Gladiator, especially for events such as Powerball, The Ring and The Edge. They're all very physical, and the contenders take very big hits from us. It's much tougher than it looks! My main strengths are my explosive power in tackling, my acceleration and my ability to quickly change direction. All the sports I've done over the years have helped me to become Fury. Before rugby, I was into Brazilian Jujitsu and sprinting, and, from the age of three, I was competing in the World Coal Carrying Championships. It's a very Yorkshire thing where you run a mile with a sack of coal on your shoulders, and I'm actually a five-time World Coal Carrying champion!

'I want to show the younger generation that even if you have a disability, you can still do what you're passionate about. I'm very open and honest about my daily struggles with deafness. When I'm in sporting environments with a lot of background noise - such as a rugby stadium or the *Gladiators* arena - it can feel like absolute chaos. I very much need to focus on eyesight visuals, read people's body language and do my homework to clearly understand the game or the tactics. I had to be very upfront and honest and communicative with my fellow Gladiators and the crew while filming, especially during team games, for which we had to work together. But they took deaf-awareness courses and went out of their way to be helpful. Making little tweaks for me made a huge difference.

'The reaction to *Gladiators* - not just from TV viewers, but also from the rugby community and the deaf community - has blown me away. But the biggest and best thing for me is hearing from young children who are also deaf or who have cochlear implants and hearing aids. The messages, comments and videos have been so heartwarming, and it reminds me why I try to be a good person and a role model. Seeing little girls flexing their muscles and wanting to be powerful and strong is such a refreshing and positive thing.' 🗨️