

Christina McMahon –A Tale of the Underdog

“It was almost a, let’s get rid of the Irish girl. They were trying to get rid of me but they couldn’t.”

Christina McMahon’s career is one of the great examples of underdog stories in Irish sport.

Despite hugely contentious hometown decision defeats and dubious testing 24 hours before fights by the World Boxing Council (WBC), Christina would not be denied becoming the first ever Irish woman to win a world title on the 2nd of May, 2015 at the tender age of 40.

Christina’s path from zero to hero is fascinating and it began in the Summer of 1995 when she took the decision to join the local kickboxing club.

“I started kickboxing first when I was 20 years old,” Christina said. “I joined with my brothers at a local club in Dundalk. Women didn’t box before that; Katie Taylor was training with her brothers and dad but there was no boxing for women.

It wasn’t until 2006 when the Irish Athletics Boxing Association (IABA) got a grant to put together a female boxing team did Christina start to focus on boxing. At this stage Christina was 31 years of age and was already past the so called prime of her career.

“I had dabbled with boxing a bit before this to help with kickboxing,” she said. “Boxing almost felt easier as it was just my hands and I didn’t have to worry about the feet. I actually found boxing a bit easier.”

When Christina reached the age of 35, her career reached a cross road. Women’s amateur rules prohibit women from fighting beyond that age.

“I had two options, go back to kickboxing or turn professional,” she said. “It was a big decision; professional level is a big step up. There are no head guards, 10 rounds instead of three and the gloves are smaller. I eventually made the decision with my husband who was also my coach to make the switch.”

In doing so, Christina became the first ever professional boxer in Ireland in 2010 at the age of 35. Although a seasoned fighter, Christina soon learned the differences to amateur level with some harsh early lessons.

“I discovered the very murky side to professional boxing,” Christina said. “Sometimes fights are set up for you not to win and sometimes they are set up for you to win. That experience was the horrible side of the sport.”

Despite some early success in the professional ranks, Christina was still largely unknown outside of Monaghan.

“A lot of my work was done under the radar, who was Christina McMahon from Monaghan.” she said. It wasn’t until RTE seen I had fought the same girl that Katie was going to fight in her debut that I stated to become known.”

It was the victory over this common foe that propelled Christina to the number one ranked fighter in Europe and into a title fight in Africa. Christina remained unfazed despite set to face a much-fancied African opponent 18 years her junior

“I never doubted I’d beat her,” she said. “She was very much the Katie Taylor of Africa. She was a young strong opponent but I had a lot of work done.”

Christina’s stunning victory in Zambia on the 2nd of May, 2015 watched by over 30m people would send shockwaves across the world.

“I shocked the boxing world, I shocked the world,” Christina said.

It was about this stage that Christina admitted she started to become more well known.

“I couldn’t go up the town for about one month solid, I’d never get home,” she said. “The county council put on a night for me in Carrick and a lot of people turned up so that was nice.”

After winning the World title many would think that would come with a certain amount of respect. This wasn’t the case however and a frosty relationship with the WBC began to develop.

“The WBC said I had two options, a rematch with the African opponent in Dublin which would have cost €40,000 to put on or go back to Africa again,” she said. “I didn’t want to do that, I felt I’d be set up. The WBC has an interest in making money. Ireland weren’t making money in women’s boxing so it was almost a, let’s get rid of the Irish girl. They were trying to get rid of me but they couldn’t.”

The WBC eventually issued Christina with an ultimatum. Either fight the rematch in Africa or fight two weight classes above that against American Ashleigh Barty.

“I chose the fight in America in the end to keep the WBC happy,” she said.

Christina began to discover that her maltreatment by the WBC would not be a once off occurrence.

“They treated me very badly in America and put me under a lot of tests I didn’t need to do,” Christina said. “They made me do tests where they injected me with radioactive glucose to see if I was sick. They wouldn’t do it to an Olympic athlete but they did it to me 24 hours before a fight.”

Christina admitted her treatment in America at the end of 2015 was a rock bottom moment in her career.

“It was a devastating moment in my career,” she admitted. “I didn’t trust people after it for a long time. For about three months I didn’t like people, my mental health was in the worst place it had ever been. The WBC wanted to take my energy from me and sap me so I wouldn’t have a chance to win.”

Christina’s lack of financial backing meant she was backed in to a corner and was forced to comply with the tests.

“The WBC had me by the wings,” Christina said. “I was going to get €8,000 for that fight and I needed it to pay for my training camp. I couldn’t afford not to fight.”

The fact Christina received such a high-profile fight after her defeat in America suggests some guilt on the part of the WBC.

“The WBC knew I was wronged and asked me what I wanted after.”

Instead of complaining of her treatment by the WBC, Christina used the opportunity to test herself against the best fighter in the division.

“I wanted the best girl at my natural weight of 52kg which was super flyweight,” she said.

“The fight was against a girl with 54 wins and only one loss which was outside her country. I wanted to fight the best, I would always retire happy if I went in and fought the best.”

The result in Mexico in December 2016 went the way of the home fighter. A familiar hometown decision that Christina began to become accustomed to.

“I went in to her country and I definitely beat her and I didn’t get the decision,” Christina said. I was absolutely gutted because I have watched it back a few times and I beat her every time. I didn’t have the big money behind me though, I wasn’t profitable for the WBC really. It’s the sad reality of women’s boxing.”

Despite the contentious decision, Christina admits she has no regrets.

“I don’t regret the experience,” she said. It probably made me a stronger person. I don’t take any crap from anyone. I never ducked a fight in my life and I can retire happy because of this”, she said.

Now retired, Christina runs her own gym in Carrickmacross.

“I teach online classes six days a week and we have a good following there so overall the future is looking bright.”