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They came. They trained. They boxed. We meet the women who made it to the finale of boxing competition and hit reality TV show *Fighting Fit Dubai* to hear their take on a life-changing journey—and take them out of the gloves and into their finery after months of literal blood, sweat and tears.

Hair: The BlowOut Bar • **Makeup:** Tania Lodi



FEAR””

SONAL KOTECHA

31, Interior Designer

After attending the Season 1 Fight Night back in November 2015, Sonal was left in shock at what she'd seen. She never would have imagined herself applying for the competition—but after some sessions with her PT that sparked a feeling inside of her that she'd never experienced from physical exertion before. "It was around the same time that I saw the advert for Season 2 and I took it as a sign. I toyed with the idea for a few weeks, but it was actually a few conversations with people who told me I couldn't do it that pushed me over the edge. I don't like being told what I can and can't do, so that give me a bit of extra fuel to fill in the application and press 'send'". At the end of Day 1 of trials, Sonal almost threw in the towel: "Being thrown in the ring with no experience really shook me and brought to light what I'd signed up for. I missed the naivety and excitement that I felt in the run-up, and it took a lot to get me back in there for the second trials, but I'm so glad I did." Training was a rollercoaster for her—some days, she wanted to give up, and Sonal felt like she was struggling to keep up in terms of strength and fitness. But by week 4 and 5, she started feeling the benefits kick in, and her progress accelerated from there. "The little achievements were the most rewarding, such as being able to do my first push-up! Sounds silly, but they were things I'd never been able to do before." The fighting was another aspect "Initially, I couldn't stop apologising every time I got a clean punch to my opponent's face. It's something I had to actively try and control. But by the

end, I must admit I was quite proud each time I made someone scream," she smiles. The discipline required to attend the training sessions was something Sonal was seeking, and then there was her usual FOMO. "I had to automatically reject any social commitments for the duration of the show. Conversely though, through it I met some awesome people who I may never have otherwise crossed paths with, for which I'm very thankful." Being on TV was another mission: "It's tough because you're exposing all of your vulnerabilities to the public. When I started, I already felt like I was trying to fight off a few stereotypes about girls of my size and background, even personality type. I'd like to think that it may inspire others in a similar position to get out there and do something they never thought they'd be capable of. Food was another revelation for Sonal: "I was a convenience eater for the longest time. My body made no secret about it. Around 1-2 weeks in, I hit a wall and didn't want to get out of bed, let alone carry on with training and normal life. I got some advice from our nutritionist, and eventually that got me out of the dark space I was in." This attitude has translated to the rest of her life now, too: "It's helped me get through times when I've had to push myself

further. My body has wired itself to be able to operate better on less sleep. It's also taught me to say no to things that might be fun but don't necessarily add the same value as starting the day early, with exercise. And I've learned to use criticism to fuel you, not break you. I am, and have been continuing to keep boxing for fitness. Now, I feel like anything is possible!"





TONI ROGAN

*33, Owner of Pro
Physique Fitness
Company*

After watching last season's show and loving it, Toni came across a Facebook post asking people to apply. Yet despite her strong fitness background—a personal trainer running her own fitness company with her husband, Toni used to be in the military and has been on the inter services netball, ski and athletics team—Toni says, “Never in a million years did I think I’d be accepted for even the trials.” But she did, even though she found it tough from start to finish. Toni began the show in the reserves team. “It was very technical, which was awesome, and our coaches supported us every step of the way. Getting up at 4am each day to get hit in the face was pretty hard for me, but after the first couple of weeks I was

fine. You kinda get used to it,” she laughs. “Being punched in the face is a pretty strange feeling. Your head literally starts banging from the first punch, and for the rest of the day your neck and shoulders have pain that you’re not used to, a bit like whiplash,” she says. But Toni wanted to be pushed to her limits, chiefly mentally. “I wanted to do it in memory of my brother, who was a professional fighter—so it was a bit of an emotional rollercoaster for me, and was very hard at times. What pushed me through was thinking of all the training that my brother used to go through to prepare for his fights. I learned ‘it’s not about how hard you can hit, but how hard you can get hit and still keep coming back.’ Boxing is like a game of chess—you have to think about what your opponent’s next move is going to be: React, respond, strike, check mate,” she says. Diet-wise, she stayed on track by signing up for a meal plan with PURA. The hardest thing for her was preparing for her fights: All of the anxiety, stress, fear, excitement and the unknown. But she’s now hooked: “I started seeing changes after 5 weeks: I lose weight, along with some muscle, and each week, I was stronger mentally and physically. I feel more confident, stronger, and proud of what I’ve accomplished—and I’ve made some lifetime friends through the experience. I’ll definitely be keeping the gloves on, and can’t wait for my next fight. I now know that no matter how many times I get knocked down in life, I’ll always keep getting back up stronger and better than before.”

HELLE BACHOFEN VON ECHT

*37, Amateur Cyclist,
Fitness Professional,
Flywheel Instructor,
Freelance Writer
& Blogger*

Last April, Helle was given the amazing opportunity to join a pro cycling team and race pro level in California. Although she feels blessed by the experience, it caused Helle to realise that she was at the bottom of where she needed to be. When she returned to Dubai, she was uncertain about where she wanted to take her cycling, and saw the applications had opened. She applied, thinking that it would be good for her to not only take a break from cycling, but also to take on a completely different challenge to push her out of her comfort zone, both mentally and physically. "I never expected to hear back from them. I simply thought I wasn't an interesting enough personality for a TV show. Through every step, I was praying I had done enough, by just being myself." Helle nailed the trials though, and she loved it. "I promised myself right from the beginning that no challenge would be too big for me. Whatever they would ask us to do, I'd do it to my best ability. Being an athlete already and knowing that I am fitter than the average, I was always pretty confident in the fitness-related tests and trials and as expected, I did well; however, I was always a little concerned that I would be too fit for the show. [At trials], I was very surprised that they let us loose in the ring with no practice, experience or guidance. That was nerve-racking, stressful, and probably the hardest thing I have ever done. It actually

really scared me. As the show started, I was not confident at all going into the ring, and I prayed that they wouldn't call me to fight, until I had actually learned how to do it. But equally I knew, that stepping into that ring, the challenge was so huge for me, that I also believed it would be able to change me as an athlete." Helle took it all in her stride, and in fact felt that we hadn't been allocated enough time for training—so she was in the gym over 30 minutes early every day to warm up before everyone else's arrival. She'd then stay for an extra hour to practice her new skills, or do strength or cardio training.

"Of course I didn't like getting punched in the face, but I loved everything else about the boxing training. It conditions the mind in every aspect: speed, agility, power, endurance, strength and core...and the mind, extreme focus and concentration, relaxation, analysis, reaction, mental strength, pushing boundaries. You just learn so much about yourself. It's a very rewarding sport, even if you stay with just the training and never step into the ring." Stepping into the ring taught Helle a lot: "I now truly understand the saying, 'Everyone's got a plan until they get punched in the face.' I guess when I entered the show, I was looking forward to the punching part, without ever really thinking that I was going to get hit too. I think it stems from the fact that I just didn't know what it was like to get hit in the face, so it was never part of the imagination or expectation. In hindsight, I had a 'glorified' view on what the process was going to be like. I was a bit shocked when I realised what it would really take to enter the ring and fight! It really pushes you to the max in every aspect. Fight our flight; our natural response, as women, is to run! But in the ring, you have

to turn everything against your instinct, and fight! It's very hard." But Helle soon got used to it, along with the reactions from the public. "My body changed a lot: My upper body became quite muscular and lean, and I had strangers asking me what I was doing. A couple of times in random lifts, as I explained I was a boxer, I witnessed people squeeze into the corner of the lift," she laughs. Now, Helle has returned to

cycling training, and doesn't think she will fight in a ring again, but she does miss the mental and physical growth she gained from boxing.

She has no regrets: "No one will ever understand what it is like to enter a ring and fight, until they have tried it for themselves. I do think everyone should try it once in their lifetime, and I'm sure they would gain a whole new level of respect for boxers and fighters."



XINI WEI

27, *Digital Executive*

Xini first heard about the competition through her friends in her dragon boating team: They knew she loved adventures and trying new things, and she's always been curious about being on reality TV. She'd also never done a competition based on individual performance before, so she wanted to see how she'd react in a situation like that. "I ran into my trial directly from an overnight flight, without much sleep and little exercise after a vacation. I felt absolutely knackered! On the second trial, I'd done so many exercises before entering the ring, it was one of the most challenging parts of the competition. My hands were shaking after," she says. Xini wound up in the reserve team to begin with, which was one of the best parts of the competition for her, due to the great team spirit and its stellar coaches. "I think I joined the red team too late to really form a bond with them, plus my first fight was two days before my biggest event of the year. It was so rewarding when I stood in the ring and felt completely relaxed, knowing I was physically and mentally prepared for a fight. When you finish what feels like the longest minutes of your life after, you feel so fulfilled" Xini isn't afraid to admit she was afraid of bleeding: "But I just tried to remember it was a sport, not just about hitting and hurting people. The hardest thing about boxing is the nerves and anticipation before a fight. It can consume all of your energy before you any punches are thrown. It comes from the fact that you're the only one responsible for everything in the ring. There's nowhere to hide, and no excuses." Another hidden well of joy for Xini

was the immense amount of support she received from her friends and family, and even her colleagues. "My parents were so supporting, and my boyfriend motivated me—he even had t-shirts made for all of my friends coming to watch my fight! When I walked out of the ring on the final fight night, all of my friends were wearing "Shanghai Smasher" t-shirts and gave me a big hug." The friendships that Xini made through the experience were another highlight: "On fight night, I stood next to Yi-Hwa and we shared tears of joy and empathy as we watched Toni and Shavon's fight. We both trained together and became friends in the reserves team, and although it was unexpected when we were assigned to fight each other in the end, we both entered the fight putting emotion aside, and came

out of it still being friends. Given the chance, I would do it all over again, with nothing that I'd change or do differently. I did everything that I could this time, and I would recommend it 100% to anyone thinking of doing this."





SHAVON SIMPSON

34, Skydive Dubai
Gear Store Manager

Shavon applied for Fighting Fit because she loves taking on new challenges and had always wanted to try boxing. Trials were just as difficult as she had expected, but being physically fit gave her an extra edge. What surprised her was how friendly people were from the very start, even though they were competing against each other. As training started, she found herself quite comfortable with the physical exercises—it was the boxing technicalities that imposed a real challenge: “I admire anyone who does combat sports; they are very demanding sports. Most days I really enjoyed getting up early and training. But there were some days—mostly sparring days—I had a lot of anxiety heading into training.” Perhaps her biggest shock came with being punched in the face. “Getting hit in the face always feels like an insult,” says the

fierce red-head. Although she, at first, believed she’d be quite aggressive, through the process Shavon learned that she doesn’t like hitting people. She had to learn how to take those hits and channel them into her fighting. Starting the show, Shavon had the physical goal of getting back into great shape, which she achieved through her time in Fighting Fit. However, that was not her only achievement. “I wanted to learn to deal with my performance anxiety and my self-confidence. It’s much harder to recognize emotional and mental achievements over the physical achievements that are so apparent; and it took me a while to realize I had done this, but watching the show back, I see it now. I learned it’s okay if I feel anxious or vulnerable at times and I don’t always have to be the ‘strong one,’” says Shavon. Through the fighting show, the self-confessed adrenaline junkie also learned new things about herself—she came to find out she was a great leader, and by showing up early and being dedicated she could also motivate her teammates. “I also learned to let my guard down and that it is okay to feel vulnerable; that by doing so, people did not judge me or look down on me as I thought they would,” she adds. The best part of her experience was also the hardest: Getting into that ring. “There is no turning back, no time to take a break, no asking for help or advice—it can sometimes feel quite lonely in there,” Shavon says. The highlight of her entire experience was definitely fight night, where Shavon found herself smiling from ear to ear. “I would no doubt do it all over again.”

NADIA CHANANDIN

29, Assistant Finance Manager

From the moment Nadia watched the first season of *Fighting Fit*, she already knew that she would be applying for season two. “I was at a place in my life where I just felt stuck and unhappy with myself, and I knew I needed something that would push me as far out of my comfort zone as I could go,” she says. For this soft-spoken but inwardly strong Kenyan, the trials were physically and mentally challenging, as she was on edge. Nadia says she didn’t know what the coaches were looking for and each step of the way, she didn’t know if she would get cut—but every challenge that she finished felt like a huge accomplishment. After making the cut for the final 30, she discovered that the surprises were just starting. “It was not what I expected—I do not think anyone can prepare for being punched in the face every morning at 5am,” says Nadia. Having her team and the coaches by her side made all the difference, and laughing with her team was one of the most rewarding parts of the competition for her. “My team became my family and I made some lifelong friends.” Nadia can describe getting punched in the face with a mere three letters: “W. T. F.” Hitting others however, wasn’t this simple. “I am not an aggressive person at all and so this brought on a whole other internal emotional battle for me. But I did it!” Getting used to the cameras that were always present for the reality TV aspect was also a process, but totally worth it. The best part of it wound up being having her amazing journey documented—and she has even been recognized a few times after the show came out. “It is weird watching myself on TV—I

think I learned I have quite an annoying voice,” Nadia laughs. Nutrition was perhaps one of the biggest challenges Nadia had to face during the show. “I have always been an emotional eater, so while I can eat healthy all day, one event can set me off into a binge,” she says, continuing: “I have been working on that on an emotional level, and learning that there are no food restrictions—I just need to tune into what my body wants, which is usually what my body needs,” she says, “I have learned to eat for fuel and not to try and fill a void, so my nutrition generally improved leaps and bounds through the show as I worked on deeper issues.” One of the highlights of the entire experience for Nadia was her new found self-confidence. “I was just looking to find myself again in all aspects. I think I achieved more than that, because I now have a belief in myself that I never had before,” she says.



NATALIE DIVERS

34, *Legal Director*

For bubbly lawyer Natalie, going into an experience like this was going to mean big changes in her otherwise sparkling social life. “Obviously going into the show, contestants were aware that training would be daily and involve early starts, so the commitment needed wasn’t news to me. But until you’re actually experiencing it and living it every day, you actually have no idea how much commitment it involved. The show became my entire life for 12 weeks—I had to be in bed by 9pm so I could be up at 4:30am. My life was basically get up, train, go to work, train, come home, pack my bag for the next day, then fall into bed exhausted. I was tired at work, I was in pain from being punched constantly and covered in bruises, I missed friends’ weddings due to training and team challenges. Saying that, I loved how my team became my everything! We were so close from day one, and really bonded and got each other through,” she says. Natalie wanted to discover a new lifestyle. “I had the typical expat lifestyle of going out too much, eating and drinking to excess, and side-lining exercise, and I needed a goal to lose weight and get healthy. Without having something to aim for, I just wouldn’t have the focus needed. I enjoyed boxing for fitness previously, and thought that using that as my method to get fit would be an enjoyable way to do it. And if I was going to step into a boxing ring in front of all my family and friends, I knew I’d need to be as fit as I could be, so I didn’t embarrass myself. Regardless of the result on fight night, I definitely achieved my goal as my fitness increased immeasurably, and my body shape changed for

the better,” she explains. As a result, Natalie also realised that she was more physically capable than she thought she was: “If someone had told me I’d be able to run up and down 52 flights of stairs, I would have told them that I was crazy, but I did it! It made me realise that I need to stop thinking I can’t do things, because I can.” Natalie devoted to herself that she did need to prioritise her health, and that she could put in the time and effort required. “Before this, I’d occasionally go to the gym, and I had a personal trainer for a while, but overall, I’d say my exercise regime was sporadic. Food-wise, before the show I’d grab something from Costa for breakfast, have a sandwich for lunch, then a takeaway at night because I just couldn’t be bothered to take time to prepare meals for myself. For the first 6 weeks, I used a meal delivery service, and I wanted to make sure I was fuelling my body the ‘proper’ way. However, my weight had barely moved on the scales, even after all that time. I know what works for me, and for the final 3 weeks, I cut out all alcohol and carbs, and dropped about 4kg. I don’t want to put my progress to waste, and this has made me determined to keep up

my fitness. I’ve signed up for an obstacle course, and also a 10K. I’ll absolutely continue boxing for fitness, and I said throughout training that I’d never have another fight, but now, I kind of miss it. We’ll see, I might not hang up the headgear just yet!”



ASMA DARWISH

36, Interior Designer

"I hated how heavy and out of shape I felt. Boxing was always my dream, and I asked around if there were any white collar boxing fights, then instantly signed up," Asma says. Despite the challenges being a

wake-up call for her health, she didn't want to be the weakest or slowest person any more. She also wanted to fight stereotypes about Arab women. "I did it for all the women, especially Emirati girls, to show how strong we are, and how we can fight hard for what we want. When I put something in my mind, I work hard and never let obstacles stop me." Getting hit frustrated Asma, but over time, she learned to control her emotions, and understand that the punches weren't personal. Rather, they were a game to help improve her skills. "I wanted to learn to forgive myself when I make mistakes, and not allow that to take me to a dark place. Everyday I felt stronger, and realised those mistakes help me get closer to my goals. I learnt the true meaning of digging deep—and also that no matter how hard life or work can get, it can't be as hard or painful as

getting punched in the face!" she laughs. Asma, who used to be quite fit and strong a few years ago, had, as she put it, "let herself go," and found it hard to get back to the gym and start training again. Through the show, and the greater purpose of representing Emirati women as well, not to mention the invaluable support from her coaches and her team, she learned to dedicate herself again, loving the physical transformation she was seeing happen right before her eyes. She also turned her nutrition around. "I'm now very aware of it, and even when I fall off the wagon a bit, I can immediately recognise it and get back on track. There's no more just stopping because I'm being harsh to myself." Asma definitely wants to keep on boxing, and loved the adrenaline so much that she wants to carry on with fights. "My next goal is also to complete a triathlon, and go back to weight training," she says. "I've learned not to compare myself to others, and it made me realise how strong my mind is, and that I'll never quit if I want something badly enough. Everyone has their own reasons, but most importantly, it must be for, and about, *you*."



LEANNE DORE

29, Project Manager

About five weeks after coming back from a Kilimanjaro trek, Leanne needed something to push her to the limit again. "It was an easy decision to start boxing, but the TV show aspect made me think twice," she said. Aside from the fact that she thought she wouldn't get through: "There were people who were much fitter than me, and everyone seemed to have an inspiring story. I felt too normal, and didn't think the producers would find me interesting enough. Unfortunately, after the first day's trial, I found out my cousin who was the same age as me had taken his own life. This made me want to get through even more. I've always believed that being mentally healthy is more important than physically, and losing a family member this way really hit home."

But Leanne had another unexpected battle to face: She was eliminated from the second trials, before a surprise drop-out from another contestant gave her the chance to come back. "I was so gutted and felt like I'd let everyone down. I cried for a full day! Luckily, my misery last long, and after a few days, I was asked back," she says. The training also proved tough for her: "I had so many problems from the first week with injuries; I think my body was just shocked with the amount I was making it do! The hardest part was actually learning the sport. It's so complex, and I now have so much respect for all athletes, and especially fighters." But Leanne took to it like a duck to water: "I have two sisters and I'm the middle child. My sisters are my best friends in the world, but we did used to fight a lot as children—so being punched in the face wasn't too hard for me to deal with," she laughs. "I also appreciated boxing as a sport early on in my journey,

so I didn't mind punching my opponent." Being on TV, however, was another revelatory part of Leanne's journey. As someone who had dealt with insecurities about her looks in the past, it took courage for her to bare all on screen, in front of the viewing public. "I was hoping to learn to be comfortable in my own skin and see how much I could push myself, mentally and physically. I have never felt comfortable with my weight or ever gone out without make-up on, as I don't have the best skin and I feel ugly without it. I hid behind make up and pretended to be confident. I knew when we started this that I couldn't wear make-up every day—not only because of the sweaty mess we ended up in after each session, but also because I was waking up at 4:30am and just didn't have the energy. Since the show has aired, I feel so much more confident. I will always wear make-up as I love dressing up, but I no longer feel I *have* to wear it. I am not embarrassed of my body or looks, and I'm proud of who I am. I definitely achieved what I set out to do. If the journey is easy, you don't feel rewarded. Now, I feel amazing!"



YI-HWA HANNA

31, Editor-in-Chief,
Women's Health
Middle East

"I spend my life telling other people's stories. I think a lot of people get this impression that I'm meant to be as fit as a PT because of the title of my magazine, but they forget that it's just a bonus that I happen to be an advocate for that lifestyle personally too—and at the end of the day, I am a journalist, which is a job known for long hours at a desk, with high amounts of stress. Running one of the biggest magazines in the region with a tiny team is no easy feat, and free time is the single most precious resource in my life. Some days, I can't respond to WhatApps properly because it takes too long as I need my hands and I'm scheduled in down to the minute, so I can only send quick voicenotes when I'm on the go, if at all. I have a lot of pressure and responsibilities in my personal life too, which have seen me battle a lot of psychological duress, depression, and more, over the past decade or so. I was raised to be conscientious and I'm what you'd call an empath, so I always feel like I have to do the right thing, even if that comes at the expense of my own health or sanity, at times. Although I've always had a fighter's spirit in that I'm super-stubborn and never give up if something actually matters to me, I am extremely soft-hearted when it comes to the people I care about, and this can sometimes get the better of me," Yi-Hwa says. One of her goals was to learn how to be selfish enough to say no to others, so that she was able to carve out the time for something that she was doing entirely for herself. "I learned the hard way that at the end of the day, you have to be

your own safety net. The only person who will always be there to catch you is yourself.

It's very hard for me to ask for help. I feel guilty asking for it, and I have trouble trusting people to stick by me through thick and thin due to the more painful life lessons that I've been through. Although I'm very self-aware about my issues, dealing with them is another story. One of the most unexpected parts of this experience was watching my walls crumble when I least expected it. It's been liberating, and it's corny, but while boxing teaches you to always keep your guard up during a fight, it also taught me that outside the ring, sometimes it's ok to let my guard down. And that even if that results in a metaphorical punch in the face, I can come back from that fighting and stronger than ever before too," she smiles. Although the 4:30am starts and often twice-daily training were antisocial and exhausting, Yi-Hwa was no stranger to operating on little sleep and committing herself to a crazy schedule: "Many days, I stole a 20-minute nap in my car so I wouldn't crash on the way home!" Physically, as someone who

thrives on an active lifestyle, doing everything from weights, parkour, surfing and paddleboarding to yoga, dancing and more, she loved the training. Punching people was another story: "I thought it'd be harder to get hit than it would be to hit people. But turns out it's the other way around. I just couldn't reconcile the idea that I was there to hurt someone who didn't 'deserve' it. Even when my friends told me to channel my rage in training, I struggled because I still

reasoned that my opponent didn't cause me that internal pain, so I shouldn't take it out on them. It was only in the ring that I was able to unleash a monster, maybe because I did it blind, so I couldn't see their eyes and didn't feel as bad," she laughs.

"Now I finally know that when I write my own story someday, my heroine is one I can believe in, because I'm proud of who I am—and that girl is a fighter, even when her walls have come down."





FATEN HURAIMI

31, *Events Manager*

Throughout the entire trial period, Faten thought she was going to be sent home after each challenge. “I was out of shape, too tiny, and too weak! It was when they announced the top 30 that it really kicked in that I wanted this,” she says. But the training proved no less harsh: With an already overwhelming schedule, teaching your body how to move let alone learn a new sport proved to be a tough challenge. “The most brutal part at the beginning was definitely the physical pain. However, as time passed, it became more mental than anything,” Faten says, explaining that being punched in the face was an emotional experience for her. “It’s definitely not a normal thing to walk up to someone and start hitting them; however, when it gets down to it and you get the first punch, something awakens in you. Part of you wants to burst in to tears,

and another part of you goes, ‘Wait a minute! What just happened?’ And you feel you just want to unleash your inner Medusa and bite their head off!” she laughs. While Faten didn’t go into this with a particular goal that she wanted to achieve, she just wanted something different in her life. “I was ready for a change [although I didn’t know what exactly], and it definitely did provide that. I learned a new sport, and who knew, at the end, I actually fell in love with it. Although I did also learn that I *hate* cardio!” she laughs. Pretty impressive for a girl who, despite eating healthy in her everyday life, was never someone you’d describe as a gym buff. “I’d never been to the gym, but I’ve always had an active life, from hiking to paddleboarding or wakesurfing, to a lot of dancing.” Being on TV wasn’t easy either: “I personally hated being on camera.”

Faten battled extreme fatigue throughout the show, due to her events-based job requiring very long hours, and as one of the smallest girls in the competition, she also wound up having to deal with fluctuating weight while fitting in to different weight categories. “I gained a total of 5 kilos, which I wasn’t happy about, but I’ve lost most of it now that the programme is over.” If she had to pick five highlights from the experience, Faten would say they were the people she met, training for the sport itself, her first and final fight, and the fact that she proved to herself that she could do it. “I’d recommend it to everyone; I’d just say to go through it your own way, as we each have our own demons to fight.”

MICHELLE SPINNATO

32, Personal Trainer & Lifestyle Coach

For Michelle, applying for Fighting Fit was a no-brainer: This was the exact reason she'd come to Dubai. "I wasn't too worried about the trials as I knew my fitness levels were high enough to survive. Then there was the Ski Dubai trial challenge. I thought I was going to die!" she laughs. Despite being one of the strongest girls in the competition, training was tough for Michelle. "I struggled immensely with the boxing component. I don't like to hurt people, and I don't think anyone likes being punched in the face. Boxing is so unfeminine. I really struggled to enrol myself in the idea of being a boxer. It's a horrible sport. It's way too violent for me. I can deal with pain, but I don't want to deal with serious injuries caused from boxing," Michelle says. And her first fight was a revelatory experience: "I think the top highlight for me would be my first fight, with Shavon. I had so much anxiety leading up to that fight. I couldn't eat, I couldn't sleep. It was horrible. But after I did it, I felt this immense relief. I was so proud of myself." It's no surprise, then, that Michelle isn't keen on continuing with fights in the ring now that the experience is over—"Oh, definitely no more fighting for me!" she says, adding: "I'm officially retired! It's not a sport I enjoy. I'm sticking with CrossFit!"—but that wasn't why she took on the challenge in the first place: For her, it was more mental and emotional. "I was hoping to regain my confidence and confront my anxiety [by doing this]. I definitely achieved that. Sometimes, you have to do the things you don't want to do, to get

to where you want to be. I have had this total mindset change since the show. My anxiety is totally under control, and I'm feeling more excited and ambitious than ever. I've learned that behind your pain, you will find your purpose. 2017 is going to be a big year in the life of Miss Mighty Michelle! I have a lot of plans to help make the rest of Dubai fitter and healthier."

