



Rolling With The Punches

Why would you want to join 50 hopefuls in fighting for their spot in an amateur boxing competition that's also being filmed for a reality TV show? Our Editor-in-Chief, Yi-Hwa Hanna, finds out...

I've got to be honest: I kind of felt like I was going in for *The Hunger Games* here. It was a mission of raw survival: 50 contenders, each going in with one sole goal in mind—to make it through, so that you could place yourself in a situation that would, after weeks of gruelling training and conditioning, prepare you to, as the official hashtag goes, #FightForYourLife.

It was 3pm on a Friday afternoon, and I was sat in the cafeteria on the second floor of The Warehouse Gym in Dubai's Al Quoz, awaiting my turn at the trials of *Fighting Fit Dubai*,

the second edition of the hit reality show about an amateur boxing competition, formerly known in its first season as *White Collar DXB*. The show, sponsored by Under Armour, boasts impressive coaching talent including former UK and Commonwealth boxing champion and world title contender Roy Gumbs, multiple Guinness World Record breaker Eva Clarke, and Chris Miller, founder of Strength Dubai. The feeling of nervousness and excitement was thick in the air, so palpable I could practically taste it. Or maybe that was just the bile



rising in my throat as I realised that over in the trials area down below, the people in the time slot before me were actually sparring. Yes, that's right, they were shoved into a ring (with full gear on, thankfully) and fighting complete strangers. I was expecting the trials to be tough, and to be an intensive fitness challenge to prove not only how fit we were but also how much we wanted it, but I certainly wasn't expecting this. So what on earth was I doing there, you might wonder?

No, it wasn't to head in as an investigative journalist and get a behind-the-scenes scoop. That was just a bonus; a side-effect of having a job that so perfectly intertwines with your passions. In actual fact, I'd applied for this purely out of personal interest. One late night in the office months ago, I threw caution to the wind and decided to pour my heart into an online application. I'd be lying if I said it didn't scare me, but there was also another side of me that felt like my insides

were ignited the moment I got that message telling me I was accepted for trials. Although I have a relatively public-facing job, I have still always been in control of how much I share with people, and there are certain aspects of my life that I am extremely strict about keeping private. The TV part of this frightens me, and in many ways, that's a much greater fear for me to face than the physical aspect—even if I know the latter will be incredibly hard, of course. I've spent years building up walls of steel around certain parts of my life, afraid to let anyone in, lest that vulnerability make me crumble. And oh, how I feared to crumble. As every hopeful #boss lady knows, being a single, fiercely independent woman who is trying to stay at the top of her game and handles everything on her own isn't easy, and it doesn't come without its sacrifices. Despite the fact that to some people, my life looks like a fun-filled perpetual bubble of joy, that's because I choose happiness, because I don't want to allow the alternative. The past seven years have been incredibly challenging for me personally, from losing my father to watching one of the people I love most in the world (who I won't disclose the name of, out of respect and care for their progress) struggle with mental illness. Add to that a demanding job in an industry known for its extremely high levels of stress and pressure, and all of the usual heartbreak that comes as part of the ebb and flow of life, and it hasn't been the easiest journey, where I've often felt like I've had to carry the weight of the world on my shoulders. Outside of the pain of watching someone you love unravel before your eyes, I myself have suffered from depression, crippling guilt and stress, and seemingly endless pressure, battling feelings of hopelessness and despair, and the sheer exhaustion of feeling like you're tiptoeing

on explosive eggshells all the time—all while trying to remain strong enough to support the people who need me. At times, I've struggled to keep my promise to my 19-year-old self that I'd never self-harm again, and I realised recently that a key reason I constantly seek adventure isn't just because of my naturally adventurous spirit—it's also because doing things like this make me feel truly alive, so that I remember why it's worth fighting to stay that way, no matter how hard you crash when you find yourself at rock bottom. People often forget how excruciatingly hard it is for the loved ones of those with such disorders, and it can really take its toll on you, no matter how strong you are—or think you are. As a child, I was taught to be mentally tough no matter what, but a side-effect of that is a fear of vulnerability, one that I've spent years trying to overcome without sacrificing even a modicum of the ferocity that upbringing affords you.

Yet I'm not complaining—I believe that our experiences shape and build us into the people we are, and I'm beyond grateful for so much, including the fact that I get to do a job I'm so passionate about, as well as all of the incredible opportunities I've been able to experience through it. I wasn't always an optimist—I had to teach myself to be this way. I believe that putting a smile on your face no matter what battles you're fighting deep inside isn't just a brave face, it is a choice, where you choose to focus on the positive to try and be happy. Even at my lowest points, I pick myself up again by remembering even the littlest things I'm thankful for—such as a roof over my head at night, since some people don't have even that. Or invaluable friends who are there to support you through your darkest hours, with no judgment. I'm so lucky to have so many who are lifeboats to me, whether they realise it or not.

I have physical concerns too: I'm worried about how my prior ankle, knee, wrist and shoulder injuries and RSI will affect me. How my lifestyle of long deadline weeks and often inadequate sleep (there's never enough hours in a day) will keep me afloat. I have PCOS and an irregular heartbeat that always beats just a little bit too fast. I still feel like my lungs are on fire every time I do cardio, and my knees creak more often than I'd like to admit, but I'm hoping this will also help me push through some physical boundaries. And I know I'm not alone in this—in the past few weeks, I've met some incredible people, each with their own story and motivation for doing this. There's the girl fighting to honour her late brother, who was a boxer. There was the single mum who beat cancer, trying to be a positive role model for her kids. There's the dad who neglected his health while raising his children, and is trying to finally take charge. Then there's the guys who, while most others were ready to slink back into bed or head to brunch after waking at 3:30am for our second trial, hopped off the bus and went straight in to work at busy restaurants until well into the evening, earning a massive amount of respect from me for their dedication and grit. And that's only a few of them. With fellow contestants like this to share the journey with me, led by truly inspirational coaches, only one thing is for certain: The journey ahead may be fraught with hardship and the unknown, but it'll all be worth it in the end—and if reigniting a fire for life is what I seek, then no matter what happens in that ring on Fight Night, I've already won. Until then, now that I've made it into the Final 30, I'm keeping my eye on the prize. Bring. It. On. ■

Fighting Fit Dubai airs in October on OSN Arabia. Follow it online at [Facebook.com/FightingFitDubai](https://www.facebook.com/FightingFitDubai) and [@FightingFitDXB](https://www.instagram.com/FightingFitDXB).