



was one of a group of four reigning female world champs in the gym.

The first sparring session I witnessed between two of those champs — a Puerto Rican veteran of 45 professional fights, Belinda “Brown Sugar” Laracuente, and White Plains star Ann-Marie Sacurato.

I stood in awe as I watched Belinda goad and move with slippery evasion.

ANN-MARIE was by contrast a classic pressure fighter with an intimidating physical presence. I turned to Alicia and asked: “Are all the women here this good?”

She threw her head back and laughed. She reminded me that they were world champions after all.

I imagined sparring with these girls and looking like a hack by comparison. It wasn’t pain that worried me so much as humiliation.

Alicia herself is like the love child of “Sugar” Ray Robinson and Josephine Baker. The former ballet dancer moves with the grace of a cat. She won a scholarship to study with Martha Graham before injury propelled her into pugilism. Her fighting name is “Slick” for a good reason. She is one of the finest female fighters of her generation.

I had already seen Alicia humiliate the German champion Alesia Graf in a clip of their title fight on YouTube. I knew this southpaw with the straight back and sharp reflexes was one of the best boxers I’d ever seen of any gender.

I had planned to train with her during my time in New York and hopefully learn a thing or two.

But on my first day she had to go to Manhattan for some sparring, so I was matched instead with Hector Roca.

The Panamanian veteran trainer and one-time cycling champion is known not just for the boxers he has trained, such as the legendary Arturo Gatti and Buddy McGirt, but also for his brushes with Hollywood fame.

He trained Hilary Swank, whose picture is plastered on the chaotic walls of his mouse-hole office, for the film *Million Dollar Baby*. He worked with Russell Crowe on the *Cinderella Man* and didn’t have a good word to say about him.

Already I could tell I was going to



have trouble understanding his accent, but before I knew it I had taken Swank’s spot with Roca and he was taking me through some punches.

He wanted loose and fast and I had to fight my instinct to hit the pad so hard he would be astonished by my power. That’s the Australian way. But Hector wasn’t interested in strength. He wanted speed.

“No,” he says, deadpan, “Choo push-in’, relax, play wid choo hands.” I strained to follow his commands and began to worry that he might think that all Aussies were just like Crowe.

Training with Alicia was like getting my hearing back, though it mightn’t have seemed so to her because again I

In the meantime, when I was training alone one afternoon, I got an offer from Raul Frank, a top-10-rated IBF light middleweight originally from Guyana.

My years in boxing have also taught me that it’s safer for a woman to spar with a man than a woman, even if he has gone 12 rounds with Vernon Forrest twice for a world title.

Raul’s chivalry was switched on and after three or four tippy-tap rounds he said to me: “You should fight. You’ve got the talent. You just need some conditioning.”

Next time I saw Alicia she said: “I hear you sparred Raul.” “Oh,” I said sheepishly. “He was just playing with

► **I’m used to walking into a boxing gym and receiving a lot of sideways glances. I am always acutely aware that I am an oddity, like snow in the suburbs**

was battling my deep-seated desire to hit like a train. After our second or third session she held my gaze for a few extra seconds and asked: “Do you spar?”

In boxing, sparring means so many different things to different people, depending on a gym’s culture. It can be anything from friendly tippy-tapping to trench warfare. So I mumbled my answer: “Well, yes, but . . .”

In truth I spar just about every week, but I know the unwritten rules on home turf and, more importantly, I know my sparring partners. I didn’t know if Alicia meant for me to be target practice for Ann-Marie before her coming title fight with “Raging” Jessica Rakocz or help a beginner learn the ropes.

me.” She smiled her characteristically broad smile and said: “That’s what we would all do.”

For our next training session she strapped my hands into 16oz gloves, lent me a head-guard and shaped up in the ring to me herself. A natural southpaw she was kind enough to spar with me in orthodox stance and at least give me a sliver of a chance.

I had imagined that I wouldn’t be able to lay a glove on her and had told her of that expectation many times. And she smiled as if she knew I was right.

I had spent my hours at Gleason’s securing a sound underdog position for myself, letting everyone know that I was old, unfit and had only an Australian

title compared with the many pairs of national and state golden gloves that seemed to belong to everyone else.

“But you Aussies are tough,” says Melissa Hernandez, who had just secured the world featherweight title.

“But you guys are good,” I said.

“Nah,” she said. “We’re not that good. We’re flashy, is all. We like to show off.”

Alicia hit me with the lightest of controlled taps and when I returned fire and tagged her, I think we were both a little shocked.

SHE told me to come back on Saturday and mix it up with a group.

I have a photo of myself with my sparring partners Camille Currie, Melodie Yam and Alicia. Compared with them I look like I have climbed out of a tank of milk I’m so white. And I like to think I did all right for a white girl.

A tiny glove mark was forming on my cheek and I started to lament the fact I wouldn’t have Camille’s long reach and athleticism to test me back home, and wouldn’t have Alicia’s speed and fitness to try to emulate, and I wouldn’t have Melodie’s determination to counter. And there were many more women to spar and so many more opportunities to improve, if only I could stay.

On my final training session with Alicia, she was telling me between rounds how it was all a matter of ironing out the glitches.

By that time, Ann-Marie was greeting me with hugs, I had bought Belinda’s old boots from her, which she had signed for me, and Raul was calling me “champ”.

While Alicia was talking I was briefly distracted from what she was saying by yet another boxing genius moving with the speed of a wizard when I heard her say: “I mean you move great.”

“Sorry,” I said, “who moves great?”

“You do,” she said.

And with those words echoing in my head I’m starting to plot my comeback . . . to Gleason’s that is.

Like I said, I’m already over the hill.



▲ **Slick:** world champ Alicia Ashley moves with the grace of a cat.

▲ **Star trainer:** (top) Hector Roca advises fighters from ringside.

◀ **Southpaw:** (facing page) Alicia in a menacing pose.

Pictures: STUART RAMSON

◀ **In awe:** writer Mischa Merz with veteran fighter Belinda “Brown Sugar” Laracuente.

Picture: MISCHA MERZ