

**IT'S** more than 10 years since I drove to Mooroopna in country Victoria and artlessly pummelled a blonde girl called Storm Brainwood. And even then I wasn't young. I was in fact three years older than my boxing age, which at the time was listed as 30. One of the officials had told me to "turn that second three into a zero, darl", when I filled out the paper work, which bought me a little extra time. When I eventually stopped competing most people knew I was closer to 40 than 30. But they turned a blind eye.

My husband Peter was in the crowd that night; a sea of flannel shirts, beanies and stonewash stretch jeans, and heard a man say to his mate as we entered the ring, "Yeah, I reckon I'd root either of 'em." These days I'd be flattered to hear such an objectification since I'm now approaching the age when women become invisible.

From that first foray into the ring in Mooroopna I believed my time in competitive boxing would be short and hopefully sweet. Instead it has been like a long-term relationship with another human being, shifting and adjusting as the years pass, swinging from obsession to revulsion and back depending on the circumstances. I've accepted now that I am pretty much shackled to the sport for life.

By the time I went on my inaugural boxing pilgrimage to New York in 2007 I thought I was well and truly over the hill as far as fighting was concerned. In the boxing world anyone nudging 30 is almost ready for the scrap heap. People like to say it's a young man's sport. There are some notable exceptions, such as Bernard "The Executioner" Hopkins, who at 43 is still competitive at the elite professional level. And Muhammad Ali's one-time nemesis George Foreman returned to a weak heavyweight division in the 1980s at the age of 40 and won the world championship at 45.

Usually, though, boxing and ageing don't marry well. But if there is one group in society more anxious about ageing than boxers, it is women. So what happens if you fall into both camps? Do you worry more about frown lines or reflexes? I now find myself in the unique position of contemplating such questions because I was reborn as a competitive boxer in America last year when I was 45. I fought in the masters division of USA Boxing, an over-35 category that isn't available here. Amateur boxing has an international cut-off age of 34 but in the US the masters are a growing force.

In May 2009 I registered with Gleason Gym in Brooklyn and had five fights across the country in as many weeks and came home undefeated – the National Golden Gloves champion, the Georgia Games champion and the Ringside World champion. I seemed to have hit some kind of sweet spot in which experience and fitness were perfectly synchronised. I entered the ring each time with a serenity I'd never known before.

And to my surprise there were enough middle-aged women in the US willing to take their chances with me, which was astounding considering that even when I was "young" in Australia I couldn't find enough opponents. And, more incredibly, many of these women were competing for the first time. It's impossible to be dismissive about such a step. These women were defying expectations on so many fronts, in and out of the sport, it was startling. It takes a rare chutzpah to step through those ropes for the first time, and to do it at an age when people expect you to be fanning your hot flushes takes extra nerve and resolve.

Older athletes are nothing new. But while they've been



Mischa Merz

Picture Jay Town

## The olden gloves

**WHEN WOMEN OVER 40 STEP INTO A BOXING RING, THEY'RE NOT JUST FIGHTING AN OPPONENT, THEY'RE HITTING BACK AT SOCIETY**

WORDS MISCHA MERZ

a common enough sight in marathons, cycling and other track and field events for many years now, a boxing ring has generally been considered among the worst possible places on Earth in which to grow old. Being entrenched in the sport, I often hear stories of former greats succumbing to the march of time. Age is often invoked in boxing as the sole cause of someone's downfall. 'How old is he now?' You hear it all the time. So really ageing as a woman boxer should be a double blow for me. But somehow it has been the opposite. My skills are improving with time and now I have extra time, unlimited time, actually, because there is no cut-off age in the masters. I feel younger than my non-boxing cohort, untroubled that male eyes skim past me, enriched by the new and uncomplicated friendships I have with young men in the gym and enjoying the authority that comes with a few wrinkles.

It was at a Gleason's show that I first saw women masters in action and it was there that it dawned on me. If they can do it, so can I. And I eventually set off on my journey nearly two years ago. After a while, it started to look like boxing was an elixir of youth, an anti-ageing formula more powerful than human growth hormones and injectable collagen. I met female veterans who were retired but still active in the gym in their late 40s and looking incredible.

What an extraordinary way to play out the narrative of female ageing in this society. The standard options are

to sink into a torpor over what you have lost, lamenting some illusory power that came with your attractiveness to men. Or else you can reclaim that lost allure with plastic surgery and turn yourself into a Cougar. Or just vanish. Become a soccer mom and retreat to the sidelines.

What defiance, then, to transgress the conventions of both gender and age and remake yourself as a warrior, demanding attention and standing alone. Here was a group of women heading in a new direction entirely, finding means of exerting power and expressing themselves that seemed to be more sustaining than whatever might be gained from the ability to make men drool.

Boxing can be painful. It's tough getting hit in the face, having a bleeding nose, black eyes, sore jaws, a cricked neck. And there's much more pain in the early days, when your defensive skills are undeveloped, when lessons learned are sharp and cruel. It's hard when you're young but maybe older women are tougher. And in boxing people often discover that they are more resilient than they gave themselves credit for. You take a step closer to yourself, your fears and weaknesses. Could it be that these women liked what they saw inside and worried less about what they saw on the outside? I'd like to think so.

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