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Shields vs. Hammer for the Fate of Women's Boxing

By [Caryn A. Tate](#) on April 12, 2019



Claressa "T-Rex" Shields is used to discomfort, both literally and figuratively. (TrappFotos)

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The fate of women's boxing—at least for the next several years—rests on the shoulders of trailblazer Claressa Shields (8-0, 2 KOs).

If that seems like an overstatement, consider the female side of the sport and the many challenges it faces. One of the biggest issues has been female fighters not getting many opportunities on television in particular, which would inherently garner more interest (see female fighters in UFC—as soon as UFC began giving fighters like Ronda Rousey opportunities, putting her on major cards, the logical result was an increase in interest and her fanbase).

Recently, however, there's been an increase in interest among boxing fans—even critical ones—and a bit more recognition among the general public as well. Major networks like Showtime have begun giving female fighters TV spots on major cards and even broadcasting events with female fighters headlining. When did the level of interest in women's boxing start to change?

2012 was the first year the sport of women's boxing was allowed at the Olympic Games. Any sport that is part of the Olympic Games is automatically taken more seriously. In London in 2012, a 17-year-old Claressa "T-Rex" Shields won the gold medal in women's boxing at middleweight (165.3 pounds, or 75 kg).

She was the first American to win an Olympic gold medal in the sport since Andre Ward did it back in 2004. Yet the accolades were far more muted than one would expect for an Olympic gold medalist. Shields knew why, as did anyone paying attention.

Most male boxers, after winning a single Olympic medal of any type, turn professional. The medal is proof of proficiency in their craft, and for an interested promoter, it also makes the fighter a lot easier to market. The fighters usually sign with a big name promoter and begin earning serious money earlier in their pro careers than their contemporaries who did not go to the Olympics as amateurs.

Claressa smartly decided to stay instead in the amateur system with a single goal in mind: a second Olympic gold medal. And she did it—in 2016 in Rio, Shields won gold again at middleweight.

With the achievement, Shields became the only American boxer to ever win back-to-back Olympic gold.

By winning not one but two Olympic gold medals, Shields became a female boxer who can't be ignored. Like all women who seek to achieve greatness in a male-dominated field, Shields understood that she had to do at least twice as much as her male counterparts to even have a shot at changing women's boxing for the better.

The other critical aspect of women's boxing finally appearing in the Olympic Games was that, finally, women had an amateur system where they could learn the craft properly. With an amateur system comes a much more level playing field: support in the form of elite level coaching, opportunities, and competitive opposition. Professional female boxers have long had to learn "on the job," rarely having amateur careers because there was no system in place to enable that. They had to seek out coaches who were willing to work with a woman for very little, if any, money.

Since Claressa turned pro in 2016, the overall interest in women's boxing has gradually increased. Whether fans are interested because they are fans of any female fighter or because they're naysayers, the result is the same: an undeniable increase in the number of eyes watching female boxing. Platforms like Showtime, ESPN, and DAZN are now opening up opportunities to women fighters on their televised slots, where we have seen boxers like Katie Taylor, Mikaela Mayer, and Cecilia Braekhus broadcast with positive results.

Shields, with her two Olympic gold medals and numerous achievements as a pro, has opened up the doors for women's boxing. And every female boxer in the sport has benefited in her wake.

As they say: a rising tide lifts all boats.

Of course the flip side of carrying the weight of an entire sport on her shoulders is that, were Shields to lose, it may all fall apart—at least for the time being. And that may be just what the purveyors of negativity want.

If Shields were to lose to Hammer on Saturday, even if it's a close, competitive loss, the critics and naysayers of women's boxing generally and Shields specifically would use it as an excuse to claim that it was all a facade. That Shields indeed didn't belong. That women's boxing is not as skillful as men's. That people don't want to see women fight.

If she were to lose, whether against Hammer or anytime soon, it would mean women's boxing could again be ignored by those who want to forget it exists.

Claressa Shields faces more pressure than most to keep winning.

This Saturday, April 13 at 9:00pm ET/6:00pm PT, IBF/WBA/WBC world middleweight champion Claressa "T-Rex" Shields faces Christina Hammer (24-0, 11 KOs) in a 10-round undisputed title bout live on Showtime. The fight has been billed as the most important bout in the history of women's boxing, and it's true.

In Shields we have the litany of accomplishments listed above, as well as three of the four major world titles in the middleweight division. In Hammer, we have an eight-and-a-half year WBO world champion. The fight is for the undisputed middleweight world title, with all four major belts on the line. Both fighters are undefeated. Both are highly skilled. Both in their primes. All of these reasons are why this is the most important bout in women's boxing history.

Hammer has been receiving a lot of praise in the media for her solid jab, and she does have a good one. However, Shields has that and more. It could be said that Hammer has one good punch (her jab), while Shields has multiple good punches. Claressa has an educated jab that she uses for different purposes and effects. She hides her power hand with it; she uses it as a rangefinder; she uses it as a power punch; she throws it away to confuse her opponent. More importantly, Shields also has a terrific left hook that her foes often don't see coming due to her blinding hand speed and the fact that the hook is coming from around a fighter's peripheral vision. As the old adage goes: punches you don't see coming always hurt. Shields also displays a potent right hand that she uses consistently, as well as an uppercut when she finds the opening for it.

Importantly, Shields doesn't waste movement in the ring. Her footwork is precise and intelligent, enabling her to get into proper position to land her own shots while not getting touched much by her opponent. Her footwork, while not always flashy, is highly educated and sets up the angles that immediately allow for success during an exchange, while her opponent is often at a loss as to why they aren't finding—or hurting—Shields, despite the fact that Claressa is right there in the pocket. Old-school fighters like James Toney and Bernard Hopkins were experts at this, and Shields is an example of a rare modern fighter who displays many of those elite skills in the ring at the top level.

Claressa utilizes smart pressure to stalk her opponent and set traps for her. She often exhibits skilled upper body movement. She's comfortable at all ranges; throughout her amateur and professional careers, she has displayed excellent skills on the inside, at mid-range, and on the outside with her punches fully extended. She doesn't need her foe to do anything specific in order to beat her. She is truly a multi-faceted fighter.

Because Shields operates at such a high level not many fighters have been able to present her with much adversity in the ring yet as a professional. That changed when she faced world champion Hanna Gabriels in June 2018. Towards the end of the first round, Gabriels caught Shields with a short uppercut on the inside that Shields didn't

see. Claressa went down, a little stunned but perhaps mostly embarrassed. She arose immediately and, while Gabriels fought valiantly and skillfully, Shields took over and dominated most of the remainder of an excellent fight.

Christina Hammer only had ten amateur bouts, a truly impressive fact given her ability to reach the top of women's professional boxing and win a world title in only her eighth fight. More importantly, she's retained that belt for eight and a half years and maintained her undefeated record.

Because of her limited amateur experience (and, of course, the lack of an amateur system for women at that time), Hammer's coaches intelligently chose to use her height and reach to good effect and helped Hammer get really good at using a classic European style. It's a straight up and down form, utilizing a consistent, strong jab and lateral movement to keep foes at bay. In short, Christina likes to create a perimeter and then do all she can to hold the line. Typically, that works very well because Hammer is so adept with this style, but also because many of her opponents don't have the skillset needed to get inside that perimeter or cut off the ring.

In 2014, Hammer faced Anne Sophie Mathis in a world title fight at super welterweight. What Mathis may have lacked in skill she made up for with heart and determination. Despite the fact that she was getting caught regularly with Hammer's jab, Mathis muscled her way inside and tried to rough Hammer up. With consistent clinching and reliance upon the referee to break the clinches, Hammer tried to mitigate Mathis' roughness and inside work.

In the fifth round, though, Mathis got inside again. Hammer clinched but was only able to hang on to one of Mathis' arms. With her free hand, Mathis did what she's supposed to do and punched. She landed upstairs repeatedly on Hammer, to the side of the head. The referee incorrectly thought these punches were behind the head, and instructed the fighters to stop. Mathis landed one more shot to the side of Hammer's head and the latter went down face-first to the canvas. Hammer didn't attempt to get up, and the referee incorrectly ruled Mathis' punches as illegal. The bout was ruled a no-contest. In reality, the punches Mathis landed were in the scoring zone (the side of the head, not behind the head), and the fight result should have been a knockout since Hammer didn't get up.

The Hammer vs. Mathis fight revealed some serious issues that Hammer may have with a rough or pressure-oriented style, not to mention being hurt and whether she'll get back up if she gets knocked down again.

The way Saturday's fight plays out will come down to which fighter is better able to adjust. Expect Hammer to establish a jab immediately and try her damndest to prevent Shields from getting in mid-range or closer. Hammer may have a lot of success early, perhaps winning the first round or two as Shields takes her time to feel Hammer out. But before long I expect the more well-rounded Shields to begin slipping Hammer's jab and establishing her own sharp punches, particularly to the body. When that happens, it'll be Shields' fight as she's the one who likes the pressure.

Based on her statements leading into the fight, Shields has drawn upon Hammer's fight with Mathis for insight. One could say that Hammer was brought to a dark place by Mathis in that bout, and Hammer was not comfortable there. Shields saw that and will want to pull Hammer back into that dark place—because, while Hammer is not comfortable there and doesn't want to go back, Shields lives there. Her temperament, her background, and her style in the ring all show that to be true. The Flint, Michigan native is used to discomfort, both literally and figuratively, while Hammer is not.

At the top level, that matters.

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