

ROAD TO TOKYO

Lynn's Rashida Ellis, one of the nation's most gifted amateur boxers, has her eye on Olympic gold

By **Steve Marantz** Globe Correspondent, Updated June 12, 2021, 9:26 a.m.



Ellis has been a fighter since her youngest days, and at 26, she is 132 pounds of sweet science and resolve. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

As a young girl in the Highlands neighborhood of Lynn, Rashida Ellis learned to ball her fists and sock boys who annoyed her. The jolt of a punch, the crack of knuckle on chin or nose thrilled her.

“I love fighting,” said the pugilist. “I love hitting somebody.”

Fifteen years ago, Ellis’s father, Ronald, looked out from his home toward Rashida’s nearby elementary school. He could see her in the schoolyard.

“I would look through my window and that child would be fighting someone,” Ronald Ellis recalled. “Always a boy. I say to her, ‘Why you hitting boys?’ And she would say, ‘Why you blame me? I put my fist out and he walked into it.’ Next thing I’m in the principal’s office.”

More scuffles, more fisticuffs and battered boys, and more warnings from the principal. Finally, father hauled daughter into a local boxing gym where her two older brothers trained.

“I’m thinking, ‘Let’s show her how it feels to get beat,’ ” recalled Ronald. “I figure she won’t like it. Second week in the gym, she wants to spar one of the guys. And he puts a beating on her. I say, ‘Good, now you know how it feels.’ So I figure she would stop. She says, ‘OK, I’m going to learn this.’ She keeps going to the gym.

“A few weeks later, she goes to the same guy and says, ‘I want to spar you,’ And she beats the hell out of that kid. And from there on, every day she’s in the gym. And I say to myself, ‘Did I make a mistake?’ ”

Ronald Ellis watched and waited. As Rashida immersed herself in boxing, her schoolyard anger receded. Ronald realized he had made the right call.



Ellis got her start sparring in Lynn, and is now a favorite to win gold in Tokyo next month. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

“Boxing goes along with a lot of discipline, so that kind of mellowed her out at school,” Ronald said. “She could fight in the gym all the time. She got to where she opened the gym and closed it.”

Rashida’s timing was good, with her fists and destiny. As she made her way through Lynn schools, and adolescence, the International Olympic Committee came to a long-overdue reckoning. Women’s boxing was added to the Summer Olympics in 2012, two years before Ellis graduated from Lynn English High but 104 years after the event had been added for men.

Today the 26-year-old Ellis is one of America’s most gifted amateur boxers, 132 pounds of sweet science and resolve. In 2019 she was USA Boxing’s Elite Female Boxer of the Year. This year’s Summer Olympics, scheduled to start in Japan July 23 after a one-year COVID-19 postponement, are in her crosshairs. Ellis is a contender for gold.

“Ever since I started to box 15 years ago, that was my main goal, to win a medal at the Olympics,” says Ellis.

More from the Road to Tokyo series: [It's not the Olympics Molly Seidel expected, but the marathoner is grateful she'll be in Tokyo at all](#)

‘It’s a mental sport’

If Ellis is to win gold, her speed, power, and endurance will be crucial. But to hear Ellis tell it, her success starts with the muscle between her ears.

“It’s a mental sport,” she said. “More than physical. If your mind’s not there, not focused, you can space out.”

Mental focus drives her Olympic preparation. In late May, at the Nonantum Boxing Club in Newton, Ellis was in the ring with Marc Gargaro, an assistant coach with USA Boxing. Gargaro called for Ellis to throw rapid-fire combinations into his target pads for extended intervals.

“We want her to be more active,” said Gargaro. “When she loses, she’s not throwing enough punches. It’s not because her opponent is a better boxer, it’s because she doesn’t throw enough. If she throws enough, no one can beat her. That’s our goal.”

Punch frequency and accuracy get higher scores from Olympic and amateur judges, Gargaro said, while power is more valued in pro bouts.

“Our practices have been more intense,” he said. “We’re training her brain to always throw, and not take mental breaks. When you’re as talented as Rashida, you tend to let off the gas a bit. We want her to have more of a sense of urgency.”



JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

“

‘Ever since I started to box 15 years ago, that was my main goal, to win a medal at the Olympics’

Rashida Ellis



As Ellis flurried at Gargaro’s target pads, and sweat beaded on her face, each punch arrived with a distinct sound, a high-pitched “boop” from her mouth. The sounds and exhalations signify Ellis’s attention to proper breathing.

“It keeps her rhythm, keeps her knowing she’s throwing,” said Gargaro. “And the boop-boop noise frustrates her opponents a little bit.”

Ellis uses a few breathing noises, interchangeably, but “boop” is what opponents should fear. It originates in her diaphragm, much like the sound of a karate strike.

“ ‘Boop-boop’ means I’m comfortable,” she says. “I know I’m hitting you.”

A sports-loving family

The story behind Rashida’s breathing technique, like much of her athletic identity, involves her parents. Though boxing historically is a vehicle for the poor and disenfranchised, Rashida was neither. Her immigrant parents carved out a foothold on the middle class and gave her a secure and supportive upbringing.

Ronald and Beverly were native to the Caribbean island of Barbados. Beverly’s mother and uncles had come to the Boston area in the early 1960s and Beverly followed in 1979. Ronald came in 1982.





Ronald and Beverly Ellis had five children. Rashida was the youngest. STEVE MARANTZ

Beverly attended local colleges and became a teacher's assistant. Ronald, an electrician in Barbados, took classes at Wentworth, got licensed in Massachusetts, and found a job with MIT that lasted for 33 years. Beverly and Ronald had five children — Rashida is the youngest — and bought a house on Chatham Street, near to the Ingalls School where Beverly still works.

Ronald had been a star athlete in Barbados, in karate and distance running, and pushed his children to embrace sports.


“Lynn is not an easy place to raise kids, and sports kept them busy,” Ronald said.

“Otherwise the streets would keep them busy. A lot of kids my kids grew up with are in prison or they're dead.”

Though not an athlete, Beverly encouraged her children to be honorable and to achieve.







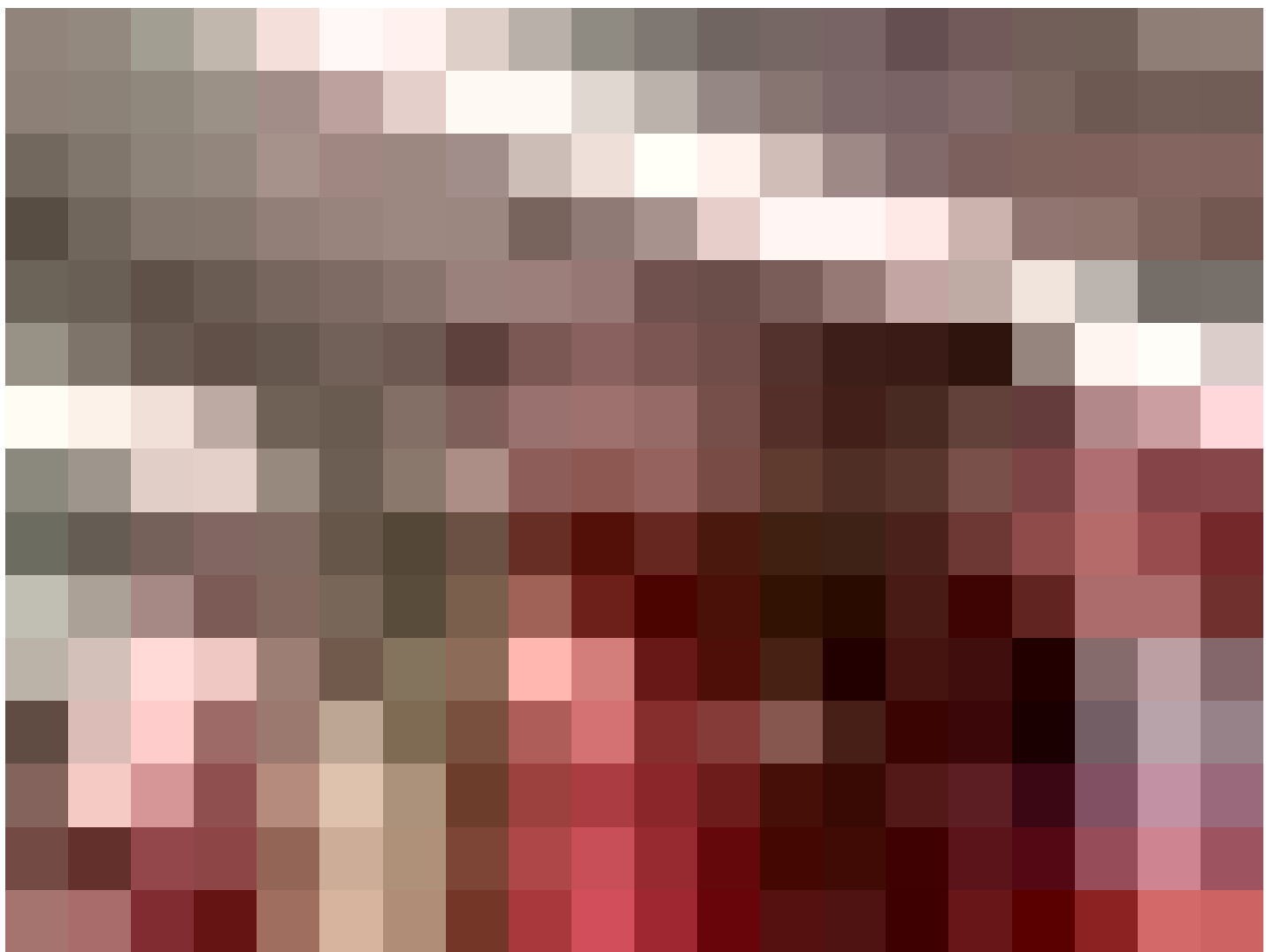
Rashida Ellis played youth football in Lynn. COURTESY/ELLIS FAMILY

“I always tell them they could be whatever they want if they put their mind to it and work hard,” Beverly said. “I tell them to keep good company and uphold their integrity.”

Karate was a staple for the four oldest, though Rashida gave it a brief sniff. The eldest, Tonya, played basketball, and the second daughter, Shenera, captained her high school basketball team. The two boys, Akeem and Rashidi, were high school football standouts and became pro boxers. Rashida was a running back in youth football and played tackle football with her brothers before she found boxing.

Ronald built a basketball court next to their house and set out a cooler with drinks and snacks.

“That was so the kids would come here and play and I could watch them,” Ronald said.



As a 19-year-old, Rashida Ellis (shown in 2014 at the Somerville Boxing Gym) already had an eye on the Olympics. ESSDRAS M. SUAREZ/GLOBE STAFF

Discipline and purpose

Ronald was hyper-vigilant as a sports dad. When Rashida began her climb through amateur boxing, Ronald noticed that she fatigued and slowed down too quickly. The problem, he concluded, was her breathing.

“You’re not breathing right,” he told her. “That’s why you think you’re running out of gas.”

As a distance runner in Barbados, Ronald learned to breathe in through his nose and out through his mouth, to cope with extreme heat. And as a youth, he dove for coral in the Caribbean and learned to go deep underwater.

“You dive down deep till your ears pop,” he recalled. “You’ve got the snorkel and glass, and the deeper you get, the bigger the coral. To get it and break it from the root, you’ve got to spend some time and energy.

“So you get halfway down and let out a little air, and hold it. You go deeper and hear a loud screaming in your ears and your ears start hurting, but you see that coral and you don’t want to turn back. When you fight with the coral, you let out a little air and hold it.

“You pop the coral and hold that last bit of air as long as you can. Then you breathe out and move right up, as fast as you can, and you get up gasping for air.”

Ronald taught Rashida to breathe slowly, and to hold oxygen in her lungs.

“She would go easy in the first and second round and try to kill everybody in the third round,” Ronald said. “I say to her, ‘Fight the first round like the last. Breathe right and you can do it.’ She try it and now she can breathe right.”

Breathing and endurance will be necessary if Ellis is to prevail in the Olympics against her archrival, Beatriz Ferreira of Brazil. The tattooed and muscular Ferreira is a bulldog, the Duran to Ellis’s Leonard, the Frazier to her Ali. The two have fought four times, each winning twice. Their 2019 bout in the AIBA semifinals is on YouTube.

Semifinals (W60kg) FERREIRA Beatriz Iasmin (BRA) vs ELLI...



“She’s tough and she likes to brawl,” said Ellis. “She likes to bully people. She beat me when I fought her fight, on the ropes, banging. I won when I just outboxed her. Let my hands go.”

Discipline and purpose

Why do women box?

Malissa Smith, who researched and wrote “A History of Women’s Boxing,” believes women box in a personal quest.

“It’s not so much you’re trying to beat up on anyone else, it’s more a test of one’s own self,” Smith said. “Can I learn these skills enough to have a boxer look back at me in the mirror? Can I really throw a hook, sink a jab? It’s a sense of pride.

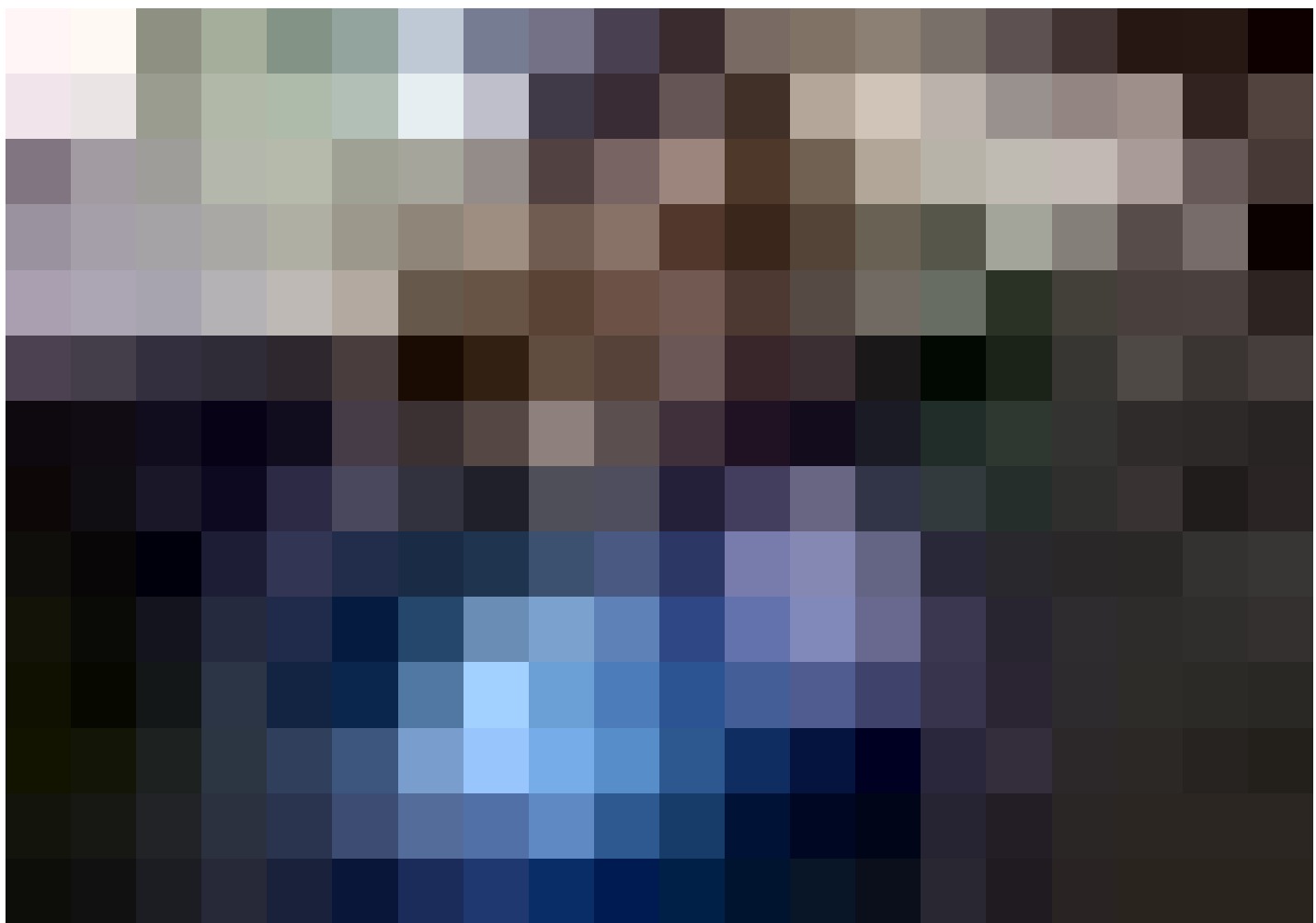
“Not to say winning isn’t great or popping someone in the nose isn’t terrific. But it’s not driven by super macho. It’s really a competition against themselves. Can I learn this and overcome my own fears or whatever is holding me back? It’s about a sense of personal fulfillment.”

Ellis gets it. USA Boxing has taken her to the four corners and paid her a monthly stipend. It has given her an extended family and a beloved roommate, 112-pounder Virginia Fuchs. It gives her discipline and purpose.

Boxing has fulfilled her since the first boy’s nose she busted on a Lynn schoolyard, since the day her dad carted her into a gym and handed her gloves, and her mother urged her to do her best.

Now she wants one more fulfillment from boxing.

“My parents’ 41st anniversary is this summer, and I won’t be home for it,” she said. “My gift to them will be my gold medal.”



Ellis will aim to make her sports-loving family proud in Tokyo this summer. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

A Timeline of Women's Boxing in the U.S.

1876: Nell Saunders and Rose Harland, two “variety dancers,” square off in Henry Hill’s saloon in Lower Manhattan for a purse of \$200.

1876-1906: Female boxers appear on vaudeville stages and variety shows across the country. The National Police Gazette newspaper confers “championship” titles on matches at Henry Hill’s saloon. Hattie Stewart and Hattie Leslie both become known as the “Female John L. Sullivan.” The three Bennett sisters box, wrestle, and fence.

1904: Female boxers put on an exhibition at the 1904 Summer Olympics at St. Louis.

1918-50: Women become enthusiastic customers at sanctioned bouts of male fighters. Boxing gains popularity as a conditioning regimen for women.

1954: Barbara Buttrick is featured in the first female bout called live on a radio broadcast. Buttrick, from England, fought in exhibitions throughout the US, sometimes against men. Known as “The Mighty Atom of the Ring,” she paves the way for the sanctioning of female pros.

1975-78: Caroline Svendsen is licensed by Nevada. Pat Pineda is licensed by California. New York State licenses Jackie Tonawanda, Catherine “Cat” Davis, and Marian “Lady Tyger” Trimiar to fight professionally. Davis is the first female on the cover of Ring Magazine, in 1978, but subsequently is alleged to have fixed her fights.

1985: Gail Grandchamp, of North Adams, sues the New England Amateur Boxing Federation to be registered as an amateur boxer. She wins her suit in 1992.

1993: Armed with Grandchamp’s court ruling, 16-year-old Dallas Malloy becomes the first woman sanctioned for a USA Boxing amateur event. She beats Heather Poyner in the first amateur women’s boxing match.

1997: USA Boxing holds its first Women’s National Championships.

1990-2005: Female pro boxers, led by Christy Martin, Laila Ali, and Ann Wolfe, are featured on male boxing cards and pay-per-view TV. Sports Illustrated features Martin on its cover in 1996. The film “Million Dollar Baby” spurs the growth and popularity of women’s boxing.

2005-20: Mixed Martial Arts eclipses women’s pro boxing in spectator popularity and financial reward. Female pro boxers get smaller purses, less TV exposure, and fewer spots on men’s boxing cards.

2012: The Summer Olympics add boxing for women, in three weight divisions, flyweight, lightweight, middleweight. Claressa Shields wins gold and Marlen Esparza wins bronze

for the US. Queen Underwood also represents the US.

2016: Shields wins her second gold medal at the Summer Games in Rio, then turns pro after the Olympics.

2019: Rashida Ellis is named USA Boxing's Elite Female Boxer of the Year.

2020: The Summer Olympics expand women's boxing to five weight divisions.

[Show comments](#)