

I entered battle like a flailing windmill and ended up like a limp aspidistra

I WAS about to witness the terrible beauty of this brutal sport, this distillation of basic urban survival instinct. I swallowed hard and repeated to myself the boxer's mantra.

"Believe in yourself and you can do anything." Stand toe to toe with Charlotte and reduce her punch by punch, feint by feint, from the status of terrifying ogre to just another blouse stripped of everything but her courage.

In Charlotte Leslie's case, this courage is immense. She's weathered a welter of ferocious blows in the corner of many a blood-spattered canvas under the blinding arc-lights and hostile crowds.

And the Millfield-educated bruiser is sitting the Oxbridge

exams this term, too. Would my credibility be blown away with a first round knock-out?

"Believe in yourself," I muttered, as the 14oz gloves were hauled on to my tightly bound hands.

We're at Spaniorum Farm near Bristol, a former cider farm and erstwhile prisoner of war camp, which now serves as both gym and home to boxing coach Tex Woodward. It is a long, long way from Harvey Nicks and my usual haunts.

The truth is that I've been training ferociously. For less than an hour. But psychologically I'm prepared. I'm sitting with giant gloves, looking like Mickey Mouse having a manicure. The bell goes.

Duck, weave, feint. I'm swaying from foot to foot, throwing

punches at my cornered adversary. Now I'm using my brutal right hook, with a technique worthy of a Detroit basement sweatshop. Eat your heart out, Evander.

The crowds are roaring with delight. A doctor stands in waiting, ready to resuscitate the victim of this withering onslaught. The ambulance outside is revving up and ready for the local neurosurgical unit.

Well, nearly. Dream on...

I'm here because this week it was decided that girls from the age of 10 are to be allowed to compete in amateur boxing competitions for the first time.

THE resolution of the Amateur Boxing Association of England brings Britain into line with the rest of Europe after 116 years in which ABA contests have been open only to macho men.

Experts pulled no punches in their criticism of the decision, but female supporters say the ruling will attract hundreds of fighters to the sport.

Tex, 63, is a former Royal Airforce champion boxer, who

has trained 40 women boxers since he started coaching in 1963. Now it is my turn. Eight women box regularly chez Tex. It is Tex who coaches Jane Couch, the world welterweight champ, who likes to be known as the Fleetwood Assassin.

Jane used to specialise in bare-knuckle boxing against men in spit-and-sawdust pubs until she turned soft and moved to the boxing ring.

It was Jane who was due to fight a woman in Copenhagen until her opponent called it off, having simply seen her on video. After all, 10-stone Jane, the former Blackpool factory worker, eats 14-stone men for elevenses.

Tex has a picture of Jane Johnson, the British lightweight champion who changed her name to Jamie. When she trained with Tex, she made the mistake of challenging Jane The Assassin and the Fleetwood lass beat her black and blue. I am due to meet Jane the Assassin, but *mirabile dictu*, she is stuck in snow on the motorway. Either that, or she's bottled out.

Now we're standing in a 20ft-

square boxing ring in a converted barn, under neon lights and pictures of Lennox Lewis, who has trained here.

Beneath my very feet Frank Bruno kept himself fighting fit while playing Robin Hood in pantomime in Bristol.

DISCO music belts out, but this doesn't detract from the fact that it's colder inside than out and I can see my breath in the air.

I warm up by skipping, something I haven't done since school, and for good reason. After I trip over the rope several times, Tex shows me a 200lb punch bag, which I am ordered to assault for three minutes. Three minutes is a very long time. This means I'm exhausted before the fight begins.

He ties on my protective bandages, which turn my fingers blue. I ask for a gum shield, but Tex says it would be unhygienic to use someone else's — and I guess my smile won't look that hot in the photos. Instead, I request a Noel Coward dressing gown with tassels, but have to go

manfully without. Real women spurn such trappings.

Then Tex offers a bra padded with concrete, but I prefer Jane the Assassin's WIBF belt, which sports eagles and mirrors and looks like Elvis Presley's chastity girdle.

Tex is wearing big, red pads on his hands to teach me to pack a punch. He explains that it's mostly tall, slim women who use their skills and footwork to keep away from their opponents. Whereas stockier women, he says, stick in close. For the purposes of wish fulfilment, I pursue my skills and footwork.

Now I move in for the fight, entering battle like a flailing windmill. The exhausted boxer is at the greatest risk, so I take a breather every few seconds during the three-minute round. "Keep moving, keep bobbing. Chin down or someone'll hit you," yells Tex.

Not much chance of that, since I run away each time Charlotte, my opponent, approaches. She has been getting fit by boxing beside grown men. Now she turns on me like a pugnacious

terrier. I keep my hands up while she punches with intent — and then I hot foot it in the opposite direction. This is more Abbott and Costello than Rumble in the Jungle.

Women are said to have lighter skulls and facial skeletons. And less muscle than men to soak up the blows.

But injuries, explains Tex, are comparatively rare. "Thumbs up," he adds, "elbows tucked in." I challenge all comers but finish like a limp aspidochelone.

Tex has trained girls from the age of 10 to Jane the Assassin, who is 28.

HE HAD a mother-and-daughter sparring team: my partner, Charlotte, 18, and her mum, another Jane and the wife of a surgeon. After two years mum gave up, partly because her daughter nearly knocked her out.

Charlotte isn't a 12-stone bruiser with muscles like iron dumb bells and a brain to match.

She is pretty and sleek, swims at national level and hopes to go up to Oxford next year.

She has been boxing since she

was 12 years old, inspired by her brother. "I like fighting," adds Charlotte, who does so twice a week. "It's not cat fighting, it's an art form, and not something personal or a streak of directed hatred. You build up a real rapport with someone in the ring. You learn to look at the way they move."

Boxing is not a conventionally feminine thing to do, agrees Charlotte, but it releases aggression and the men respect and admire her for doing it properly. But it's not flattering and she doesn't like to watch women fight.

Female boxing shows have only become popular here in the past three years. But women have been boxing since the time of Roman gladiators.

Tex is all for women being boxers, as long as they do it safely and correctly with a coach. It costs only £3.50 a session to train with him — a price far too high for me.

I'd rather be the female second and administer the water and spit bucket. But on the whole, I think I'll stick to Sloane Street.



KNOCKOUT COMBINATION: Bristol bruiser Charlotte Leslie, 18, is Millfield-educated and plans to sit Oxbridge entrance exams next year



PACKING A PUNCH: Amy Douglas who is yet to hit 14



SPARRING PARTNERS: The author with young fighter Amy