# TV Close-Up: Laila Ali

*by Eirik_Knutzen*

A knockout in a slinky satin dress or a pair of baggy silk trunks, Laila Ali knows it. Self-confident to a fault, there is no doubt in her mind that she can blind you with a dazzling smile or beat your brains out with a powerful left hook.

LAILA ALI - Laili Ali, daughter of boxing legend Muhammad Ali, is rapidly emerging as a top contender, with Russian partner Maksim Chmerkovskiy, on the fourth season of 'Dancing With the Stars.' CNS Photo courtesy of Carol Kaelson. Rapidly emerging as a top contender - with Russian partner Maksim Chmerkovskiy - on the fourth season of "Dancing with the Stars," the undefeated professional boxer who holds five World Champion belts (three as a super middleweight, two as a light heavyweight) also wants to show an aspect of her personality never on display in the ring.

"Dancing is hard work, but it looked like so much fun, different from what I normally do, which is grueling and dangerous," said Ali, 29, daughter of boxing legend Muhammad Ali, who stands 5-foot-10 and usually weighs in at 166 sculpted pounds. "For those who want to see the glamorous, cream puff me, this is their opportunity."

The "new" Laila Ali has already surprised family, friends and legions of fans, according to the tough athlete capable of taking out a quarrelsome competition judge with either hand.

"I'm not the most sociable person, so people who know me go, "'Dancing with the Stars?" Get outta here!'" she laughed. "But this is a different me, someone competing in character."

Having fun on "Dancing with the Stars" is one thing, but gunning for the win is quite another, according to the intrepid Ali.

"Most performers really don't want to put pressure on themselves, but I like the pressure because it motivates me to work hard and back up what I say with action. I have no problem saying, 'I'm gonna win this competition' - and meaning it. I go into every challenge knowing I can conquer anything that I'm faced with."

Ali also believes that she has a leg up on most of her competitors, mentally as well as physically.

"I start training 10 weeks before a fight, running five miles six days a week and working out in the gym for several hours Monday through Friday," she said.

"Training for 'Dancing' is a piece of cake - I just walk into the studio, forget everything else that happened and focus on dancing five or six hours a day, five days a week," Ali continued. "And being a professional athlete who is both strong and fit, I don't get as tired as some of the other celebrities. Because my partner has the experience in ballroom dancing, I trust him to make the right choices."

Smart and articulate, Ali has also made "Dancing with the Stars" part of her springboard for a prosperous, high-profile future. At the age of 29, she already knows that her years as a pugilist are numbered.

"All boxers know it's a dangerous profession, and I've taken a year off anyway because I'm frustrated with the lack of competition. Two girls that could be competitive keep running their mouths, but are doing nothing about it. I'm actually at the point where I would retire."

Not a threat to Cate Blanchett or Halle Berry in the acting department (though she does have several screen credits), Ali is focusing on developing a career in health and fitness once she hangs up her gloves and starts a family with fiance Curtis Conway, a former NFL player.

"I'm into being healthy and staying healthy - the basic message in my motivational speaking engagements."

The comely Ali - one of nine children spread between her father's four wives, two extramarital relationships and an adoption - also sees a fluid transition from sports to health and fitness-related cookbooks and TV shows. They would mesh nicely with her current boxing-aerobics workout DVD opposite fellow champ Sugar Ray Leonard, "Workout of Champions," and the motivational book she wrote four years ago, "Reach, Finding Strength, Spirit and Personal Power."

Born in Miami and raised by her mother, Veronica Porsche (wife No. 3), Ali was running a nail salon when she watched her first women's professional boxing match on television.

"I automatically wanted to do it - it's in my blood," she explained. "What can I say?"

Not at all encouraged by her father, she started training in 1998 and made her professional boxing debut in October 1999, when she knocked out somebody named April Fowler in 31 seconds. En route to her 24 wins with 21 knockouts and IWBF, WIBA and WBC championship belts, her toughest opponent was Jackie Frazier-Lyde, the daughter of her father's old nemesis, Joe Frazier.

Frazier-Lyde - a lawyer by trade - put up a good fight in 2001 before losing an eight-round decision, according to Ali.

"She was strong and had lots of energy, plus all the genuine animosity from our family histories," she recalled.

"And it was the first fight that I didn't win by a knockout. She doesn't fight anymore."

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