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## Pulling No Punches: Mary Kom

If you wish to probe into the psyche of the remarkable woman featured here and understand what it took for her to emerge from obscurity to become an international icon, we must begin with a story in the Bible. It is a story she remembers every time she stands face to face with each daunting challenge. The story of David and Goliath inspires and motivates her to use her petite body like a lethal human cannonball. “Like David, I too am small,” Mary Kom has earnestly explained in many televised interviews. “And like him, I too am not afraid to fight those that are bigger than me.”

“The strength of a woman is not measured by the impact that all her hardships in life have had on her, but the strength of a woman is understood by the extent of her refusal to allow those hardships to dictate to her and who she becomes.” These words seem to have been penned with the indomitable Mangte Chungneijang Mary Kom in mind. Born on March 1, 1983, in a remote village of Kangethei in Churachandpur district of the Northeastern state of Manipur, she is the eldest child of a poor tribal family. Her parents, father Mangte Torpa Kom, a former wrestler, and Mangte Akham Kom, her mother, were shifting cultivators who toiled doggedly in their *jhum* (shifting of cultivation) fields, barely managing to

provide sustenance for their family of four children. One of Mary's middle names, given by her grandmother, was Chungneijang, which means prosperous. It was a word Mary was intensely aware of from a very young age, and she quietly resolved to do what was required to lift her family from the quagmire of poverty and hardship. As the eldest child, Mary understood her responsibilities very early. A tough, wiry child, she did not think twice about pulling the plough through the muddy fields or lifting bundles of wood to sell in a nearby market. She would sit at the loom and weave *punshi* shawls and *punvei* wraparounds. She caught fish, cooked over smoky wood fires, and even made charcoal to sell to villagers. She was always running from one errand to the other, restless and eager to have some time to play. Her friends often teased that she would give P.T. Usha a tough time. As a student of Loktak Christian Model High School in Moirang, she was indifferent to academics but avidly took part in hockey, football, and athletic events. She was a great fan of martial arts films, and when she saw Muhammad Ali boxing, she had her first epiphany. This was it. Boxing was what she was destined to do. And when fellow Manipuri Dinko Singh won the gold medal in the 1998 Asian Games, it was like a sign from above for this devoutly Christian girl. By then, she had moved to Imphal to train for athletics. Boxing was a sport she took up secretly. At that time, boxing was considered an unladylike sport, and father Mangte Tonpa feared that if she injured her face and marred her looks, no suitor would come forward to marry her. So Mary took the most crucial decision of her life without her father's permission.

At Imphal, she wasted no time in presenting herself at the Sports Authority of India Complex, before the boxing coach, K. Kosama Meitei. Dressed in a torn T-shirt, without proper shoes on her feet, the slender girl plainly looked as if she were in the wrong place. In fact, so unimpressive was she that Kosama refused to let her even speak and waved her away, saying rehearsals were in progress. On the ring, men were sparring, pulling punches, and jabbing in the air. The air crackled with tension. The men's singlets were

drenched in sweat. Some had bruises on their faces and arms. Kosama stood watching intently, shouting out encouragement, pulling up someone, and timing the bouts. Hours passed by and when the trainees packed up and left, Kosama was astonished to see the girl still standing close by, her dark eyes meeting his in mute appeal. After three days, the tough coach melted, but not before warning her that she was about to embark on a dangerous sport; that she would have to fight against men, there being no women trainees; and that she would always have as her opponents boxers who were taller and heavier than her. Mary listened and nodded. Of course, it was so simple. She would just have to be David.

But epiphanies are one thing and reality another. Muhammad Ali's punches looked effortless on television, and here, as her training started, her body was stretched to the limit during the grueling practice sessions. Every muscle cried out for relief, and every bone in her body ached. But the exhilaration of doing what she loved made it all worthwhile. Coach Kosama, moved by the feisty girl, explained all about the sport to her. Boxing was a martial art and combat sport in which two people fought each other, using strength, speed, reflexes, endurance, and will, and throwing punches at each other with gloved hands.

So there was Mary, learning, absorbing the techniques and rules with undivided attention. Returning to her uncle's home, she would lie awake after dinner, reminding herself of the rules. "I must not hit below the belt; I must not hold, trip, push, bite, or spit. I am not allowed to kick, head-butt, and must only hit with the knuckles of a closed fist." Half-way through her memorizing, Mary would drift off to sleep, dog-tired after day's exertions.

Learning what technique suited her was equally challenging. Her coach M. Narjit Singh helped her grasp the basics. "See, girl, no two fighter styles are the same. It all depends on what kind of a body and mind one has. There is the boxer out-fighter. He always puts himself at some distance from his opponent, using jabs and

long range punches. Muhammad Ali and Sugar Ray Leonard, they were of this type.”

“Then you have the boxer who are punchers. He is a well-rounded boxer who can fight from close range and using several techniques. There are the counter-punchers who are quick to use the mistakes of their opponent to score. The brawlers or sluggers are not very polished but try to win by sheer strength. Infighters stay close to their rivals and use hooks and upper cuts to defeat them. As you learn, you will understand what style works for you.”

So Mary immersed herself in the world of the jab and the cross, the hook, and the uppercut. She learnt to slip, sway, duck, lob, and weave and to parry and block. Long after the male trainees left, Mary would be on her feet, dancing up and down, swinging punches at an imaginary foe.

This wiry girl, now in her late teens, was unstoppable. In 2000, she burst into the boxing scene with the Manipur State Boxing Championship. Her father Mangte Tonpa had heard that there was a promising woman boxer belonging to the Kom community. But he had not put two and two together, simply because he could not believe his first born would defy him. Imagine his consternation when her face was splashed in the newspapers after her victory. Cut to the quick, Mangte Tonpa fumed and refused to talk to his daughter. But Mary was not one to give in easily. She had found her calling. Boxing was what she was born to do. Hearing the steely resolve in her voice, he softened and said, “If you believe that, child, then let it be as you say. Your mother and I will try to give whatever you need. Your path is difficult, but you have our blessings.” A great weight rolled off Mary’s mind that day. She would no longer have to feel guilty and be secretive. She could now concentrate on following her idol Muhammad Ali. And soon she was streaking like a comet, reaching the international level in boxing at 18, just a year after starting formal training. It was an incredible feat. It was also the time to travel light, and she simply

called herself Mary, taking much comfort in that it revealed her faith, which was always a key factor in her life.

Before following Mary's meteor-like trajectory, it would be a useful exercise to trace the history of women's boxing. Boxing has always been a male sport, participated in by men, who were not only trained by men but also booed or cheered by an exclusively male audience. The early beginnings of women's boxing are pretty much unchronicled because there was stiff opposition and women did not get to box professionally. The first recorded evidence of women's boxing can be traced to London in the 1720s. But until the 1950s, only sporadic bouts were fought. Moreover, the contestants did not have to adhere to specific rules, and hence, these events were not standardized. In US, the first bout between women boxers was said to have taken place in 1876. In 1904, during the Olympics in St. Louis, US, female boxing was merely an exhibition sport, and only in 2012 did it get recognition as a competitive sport. It must be mentioned that the 1950s witnessed professional female boxing and televised fights became the rage. But it was only as late as in 1993 that US boxing was compelled to recognize and support female boxing and female amateur boxing. Some of the promising female boxers were the legendary Ann Wolfe, Christy Martin, and Laila Ali, daughter of Muhammad Ali.

Today boxing is one of the most popular sports for women. However, women's boxing does not invite wide media coverage. The sport has suffered from marginalization. Unlike men's boxing, the female counterpart lags behind in solid infrastructure, financial backing, and public support.

Obviously there are bound to be some differences in the rules governing male and female boxing. The equipment they use are different and women have some pre-match rules that men do not. Female boxers have to wear both a groin protector and a breast protector while a groin protector suffices for men. Both, however, have to wear a mouthpiece. Female boxers are not allowed to wear make-up during a fight. They are to tie back their hair with soft

and nonabrasive materials. They must also undertake a mandatory test to prove they are not pregnant. While male boxing matches range from 4 to 12 rounds, female boxing matches have a maximum of 10 rounds.

In a remote corner of the world, Mary Kom rises to meet her destiny. Her impoverished family cuts corners to ensure a good diet, equipment, and training. The family cow is sold off to pay for her training. After her win in the Manipur State Women's boxing championship in 2000, she swiftly clinches the regional champion title in West Bengal. Since then, the sky has been the limit for Mary, a gawky 18-year-old with her trademark fringe of hair and a face revealing the reserves of strength within, Mary was on the threshold of international fame. She would be flying to cities around the world, places she had never even heard of, meet people of many races, and hear varied tongues. She would taste strange food and handle a bewildering range of currency. There would be flashbulbs popping around her, requests for autographs, thunderous applause, medals around her neck, and trophies in her hands.

Her international debut was at the first AIBA Women's World Boxing Championship in US, where she won a silver medal in the 48-kg-weight category. She was on a winning spree after that, including winning the AIBA Women's World Boxing Championship in Turkey in 2002. In 2004, she won gold at the Women's World Cup in Norway and, in 2005 again, won gold at the Asian Women's Boxing Championship in Taiwan and the AIBA Women's World Boxing Championship in Russia. The following year saw her winning gold at the Venus Women's Boxing Cup in Denmark and the AIBA Women's World Boxing Championship in India. But a bout of illness forced her to stay away from the final of the World Championship, though she was leading 19-4.

But life was not just about jabs and punches, workouts, and sparring. Unknown to Mary, love was waiting to claim her. The man was Onkholer Kom, better known as Onler. He was a student in

Delhi, a leader of the Kom community there, comprising mainly of students and young professionals.

After his graduation from Sankardev College, Shillong, in 2000, Onler worked in the Customs and Central Excise for sometime in the mid-1990s. Later he went to Delhi to study law. At one time he ran an NGO named Rural Development and Relief Centre in his native village Shamu Lamlan in Churachandpur district of Manipur. He has represented football teams of the region under different capacities. In 1999, he lost his mother and resolved to return to Manipur to look after his ailing and elderly father. However, his father expressly told him to continue his studies. At about that time, he also broke up with his girlfriend. In 2001, Onler and Mary's paths crossed, and a beautiful romance blossomed. In the years to come he would be the wind beneath her wings, the rock-steady anchor that provided her the security and assurance she so needed. A silent, soft-spoken man who could display unexpected flashes of humor, Onler was nine-years older than her. In 2001 Mary happened to be in Delhi. She was on her way to participate in the National Games in Punjab. Members of the Kom community met up for an informal interaction. Onler was a student of law at Delhi University. He chatted briefly with Mary. Their association continued. She visited him every time she was in Delhi. He gallantly escorted her around and treated her to home-cooked meals that were finger-licking good. By now they were deeply in love. From the very beginning Onler seemed to understand the role he was destined to play in her life. He was to be her morale booster, caregiver, and a mentor. When Mary was scheduled to go to US for her first world championship, tucked into her purse was a sum of only ₹1,500. Onler's heart brimmed over with love and concern. He approached members of the Kom community at Delhi, met up with MPs from Manipur, and soon handed her a sum of ₹15,000. The couple, deeply committed to each other, had to go without the normal pleasures of dating and romance. Mary

was totally focused on her burgeoning career, and Onler quietly played the role of being her strength. In 2005, Onler and Mary got married. She looked radiant in her white gown and frothy lace veil, her arm linked to her groom's. Many of her detractors made smug predictions that her career would take a nose dive, but the feisty bride, with the warm, all-embracing love of her husband, was poised for even more spectacular feats.

That same year, she won gold at the Asian Women's Championship in Taiwan and surged to victory at the AIBA Women's World Championship in Podolsk, Russia.

Then, in 2006, a heartrending tragedy befell the family. Onler's father, a 67-year-old school teacher, was brutally gunned down by a little-known group called Manipur Komrem National Front. A note next to his bloodied corpse informed that he had been given the capital punishment for working against the group. Till date, Onler is certain that the heinous murder is the work of vindictive suitors whom Mary had previously rejected. She was so traumatized by the murder of her gentle father-in-law that she even thought of bidding goodbye to her boxing career. But Onler would have none of it. Life, he said, would have to go on as before.

A few months later, the couple experienced a double blessing, as their twin boys were born. Mary had a difficult childbirth, and the babies were delivered by caesarean section. From being a world champion pugilist, Mary was now breastfeeding, washing nappies, and singing her boys to sleep. Mary thought it was the end of her career. But just a year afterwards, she wore her gloves and was raring to go. Her parents were very worried and feared that her caesarean stitches would rupture if someone punched her in the belly. Though Mary assured them there was no cause for concern, she was dismayed to find that her body lacked its old strength and suppleness. She tired easily, grew breathless, and her limbs ached as she drove herself to perform. But she resisted and was poised for a comeback. But it was heartbreaking for her to part from her twin



boys, Rechungver and Khupneivar. Thousands of miles away, trying to sleep in her hotel room, she would weep at the memory of their baby prattle, their angelic smiles, and the way they loved to bounce in her lap. But she had not come far along this lonely path to turn back. Psyching herself to control her emotions, Mary forged ahead with a trail of glory. She not only won the national championship but also the silver at the Asian Women's Championship in Guwahati in 2008. Late that year, she got back her crown at AIBA Women's World Championship in Ninspo, China.

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Mary and Onler will always remember the year 2011 as one of the bleakest in their lives. Their son Nainei was found by doctors to have a hole in his heart. He would have to be rushed to Chandigarh's Postgraduate Institute of Medical Education and Research. Onler persuaded Mary to leave for China as scheduled. Mary won the gold medal and rushed back to be with her ailing son. He was successfully operated on, and the couple breathed a sigh of relief.

Mary's winning streak continued. In 2012, she won the gold medal in the 51-kg class at the Asian Women's Boxing Championship in Mongolia. For the record, in 2010, she had won the gold medal at the Asian Women's Boxing Championship in Kazakhstan and the AIBA Women's World Boxing Championship in Barbados, her fifth consecutive gold in the championship. In the 2010 Asian Games she competed in the 51-kg class and won a bronze medal. Women's boxing is not included in the Commonwealth Games, but Mary, along with fellow boxer Vijender Singh, had the honor of bearing the Queen's baton in its opening ceremony.

The thin, shabbily dressed girl, whose eyes gleamed with mute appeal so many years ago, was now an international star. The government had given her a job in the police force. There were armed

guards protecting her government quarters; trophies and medals jostled for space in her glass cases. The Indian government honored her with an Arjuna Award in 2004, the Padmashree in 2006, and the Rajiv Gandhi Khel Ratna in 2009. Mary could afford the best things of life. She loved to shop and give herself manicures. But when she was at home she loved to be just a mother and a wife, cooking, washing, cleaning, and playing with her boys. It was a time when she could relax, as no cameras beamed on her every move. Back at Kangethei, her parents and siblings got on with their simple lifestyle, happy to go on as before, unaffected by her fame and success. Looking at them, one is reminded of Mary's humble roots and the tremendous willpower and faith that took her this far. Her home state is on the periphery of mainstream India. Young Manipur boys and girls, venturing to the metros for studies and jobs, are called "chinkies" and mistaken for Chinese. These youths are compelled to migrate because Manipur has been in a permanent state of siege. There were as many as 32 rebel groups—breakaway factions clamoring for autonomy but without any consensus in the state. In the Manipur capital Imphal, wire barricades guard government buildings, and army flag marches are a daily affair, while the insurgents go on killing and extortion sprees, even children are kidnapped and forced to become child soldiers. The excesses of the insurgents have led to the imposition of the AFSPA, which gives the armed forces the power to arrest, interrogate, and even torture anyone at will.

In order to understand Mary, and the extraordinary power that propels her forward, we must know the desperation of her people, their struggle to lead a normal life, and the many odds they have to face.

There was a time when Mary was terrified of talking to her boxing coach when she met him for the first time, because, according to her, he looked like Mike Tyson. Now, as the years passed by, and she rose to the height of fame, she grew confident and

articulate, addressing large gatherings as well as giving television interviews. She held center stage at a global investor summit. Dressed in a smart black blazer, cream pants, and enormous wedges, she talked about “Lessons from my journey” in her open, natural style, punctuating her sentences with girlish laughter. She switched now and then from English to Hindi. She said, “Boxing is a punishment game. You win, you get hurt. You lose, you get hurt,” which was greeted with loud applause. She described how her passport and documents got stolen during one of her early trips abroad and how she prayed and agonized over whether to come back or stay. With heartwarming candor, she described how she was pummeled in the first bout of an Asian championship. She said, “I want to win every time, but I guess it’s not possible.” She then went on to say, “It’s easy to perform well after marriage. The real challenge came later. I had to work very hard and have great willpower. When I gave birth to my sons, people said, ‘It’s over for Mary Kom.’ I proved them wrong. Then in the Olympics, I had to play in the 51-kg category. I had played in the 46 and 48 kg only previously. My fellow sportsmen said unkind things behind my back. I don’t fight them outside. I just want them to face me in the ring. When other contestants fight me and lose, they look upon me as the enemy. They don’t consider it as only a game. I am proud to represent my state.” Then she talks about creating new Olympic champions, new Mary Koms, in the future through her boxing academy.

However, it was Mary’s success at the London Olympics and winning a medal for India that catapulted her to stratospheric heights. Her success is all the more significant because it was in 2012 that women’s boxing was included in the Olympics for the first time. Yet, right at the very beginning Mary stared dismayed at what seemed an insurmountable obstacle. The lowest admitted weight in the Olympic Games was 51 kg. Mary had won one silver and five gold world championship titles only in the now defunct pin-weight (below 46 kg) and light flyweight (45–48 kg)

categories. Her weight was clearly below the mandatory 51 kg. She drew comfort solely from the fact that she had once boxed in the 51-kg flyweight category at the 2010 Asian Games in Guangzhou, China, and bagged a bronze.

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London, August 2012—Mary is in the ring, slugging it out with adversaries who are taller and heavier. But what works on her side is her in-built aggression, nimble footwork, and sheer staying power. First she defeated Karolina Michalezuk of Poland 19–14 and then demolished Maroua Rahali of Tunisia 15–6 in the quarterfinals. In the semifinals she met her old adversary Nicola Adams of Great Britain, who had routed her in a world championship in China, at the 10–12 AIBA Women's World Boxing Championship. As Nicola defeated Mary (6–11) the whole of India grieved for the feisty little warrior and understood her pain as she tearfully apologized for not being able to bring the gold. But the bronze was hers, an astonishing feat for a woman who had become a mother only a year before; a woman who hailed from a remote, backward, and trouble-torn state; and the daughter of an impoverished family. Indeed, she was Magnificent Mary, an icon of female empowerment, whose life was a saga of being able to make miracles possible. In fact, she says she is lucky to have been born poor, for it taught her to struggle hard and channelize her angst.

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Filmmaker Sanjay Leela Bhansali is all set to make a biopic on Mary, with Priyanka Chopra essaying her role. Mary loves to sing Hindi songs and jokes that maybe, just maybe, the Manipuri rebels would lift the ban on Bollywood films after the movie on her.

Mary is generously open about her fighting strategies. She says she tries to avoid distractions and keeps an eye on her strengths and

weaknesses. Remembering the hardships she herself had to face in her quest to play this sport, in 2007, she set up the M.C. Mary Kom Boxing Academy at her home in Imphal's Langol Games Village. When Mary is at Imphal, she runs the whole show, and in her absence, Onler is in charge. She has no less than 30 students under her, one of whom has been the national champion, S. Nengneiket Kom. The academy has a large open field and some boxing gloves. There is no ring in which to practice. Fifteen of the students live with her. She even pays their school fees. She drives them hard. They rise at dawn, doing their warm-up exercises, running, jumping, shadow-boxing, and sparring. Working in pairs, trainees pummel their partners to focus. Through all this Mary's mongrels, Scuba and Steffi, bound around, barking in excitement. When Mary, after her own punishing morning work-out, comes to see how her students are doing; everybody perks up, putting in their best. Scowling, she moves among them, criticizing, encouraging, explaining, and making them titter with her mimicry of their moves. Mary herself was trained for the Olympics by her British coach Charles Atkinson, who taught her to be absolutely fearless when meeting her opponents head-on. He laid stress on building up her stamina and muscle mass for the event.

Mary's coaches believe that at 33, she will still be able to bag the gold or silver at the Rio Olympics in 2016. Recently having given birth to her third son, Mary looks forward to that distant date with quiet confidence and humility. And she draws strength from her favorite passage from the Bible, Mathew 7:8, "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened into you." No wonder the two words this million-dollar champ uses most often are "full confidence."