

Stacey Copeland: Smashing the barriers on the way to the top

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We are incredibly proud to showcase former England Football player turned Commonwealth boxing champion, Stacey Copeland, as part of our Empower Hour series, which shines a light on athletes who have triumphed in the face of adversity. Stacey has battled against the odds to succeed in male-dominated sports while facing various obstacles on her way to the top. By using her determination, she has not only become a champion athlete, but also an important role model and advocate for shattering stereotypes. We hope Stacey's journey will motivate you to confidently traverse your own path to physical and mental health, and enable you to flourish in the face of adversity.

From being asked to leave the football field for being a girl, to finding out it was illegal for women to box, Stacey Copeland is no stranger to the barriers women can face when it comes to succeeding in sport. Despite significant setbacks, she has mastered both sports, going on to play football for England and becoming a Commonwealth boxing champion.

Stacey now advocates for equality in sport via her charity, Pave the Way, and is a fundamental role model for those who grew up being told they couldn't do something due to unjust stereotypes.

Breaking down barriers

Having grown up with a family background in boxing, (her dad was a boxer and her grandad ran the local boxing gym), it was a shock to Stacey to be told that it was illegal for women to box, as she did "everything the lads did" in training. However, when it came to actual fights, she was up against a bureaucratic brick wall.

With steely determination, she moved forward and embarked on a highly successful career in football instead. After early setbacks, (she even cut her hair short to pass as a boy at times), she never floundered and ended up reaching the heady heights of representing England. Stacey went on to play abroad for around five years and, once she took a step back from the "beautiful game", found that her simmering passion for boxing was re-ignited.



Having kept up with her training throughout her footballing career, and the sport now being legal for women to participate in, Stacey would go on to pursue her childhood dream of boxing. "I didn't see any reason why girls wouldn't box because I just loved it... I also was used to the society that I was being raised in, which was a society that certainly didn't see a place for women in sport, full-stop, [and] certainly sports like football and boxing at that time."

This didn't stop her, however, and she went from strength to strength, winning two national titles and a European silver medal. Stacey then turned pro and fought in Zimbabwe for the Commonwealth title, which she won, making her the first British woman to do so. "The journey of women's sport, I think just shows what is possible, even when at the beginning, it isn't." Stacey is proof you can achieve anything with a strong passion and unyielding determination.

Listen to Stacey's advice on staying motivated and achieve your goals

Listen

Finding inspiration

Having faced so many barriers to merely compete in the sports she loved, Stacey is now a renowned role model for up-and-coming athletes. "We are told from a certain age that girls are less capable, if not completely incapable of certain attributes, and it's just not true. You have to break down those barriers before people themselves can believe they can do it. And then we can convince everyone else... That's why role models are important, so that you can see these myths being broken down. I just really want gender stereotypes to no longer be a barrier to people's potential. There are loads and loads of people, girls, boys, men, women, who are still giving up on the pursuit of their dreams or passions because of the stigma that they face."

As well as this mission, Stacey acknowledges the importance of carving out an identity outside of sport too. "When I got a serious injury, particularly in America, I felt like I had no purpose whatsoever. I lost my entire identity [and] my reason for being here, and that's not healthy... I'm a big advocate for athletes finding other purposes in life and other passions, because it's important that your entire identity and self-worth and everything isn't wrapped up in sport". This is great advice for any career path, as it's important for us all to take stock of who we are outside of work and find time for things that genuinely bring us joy.

Find out who Stacey considers to be her biggest inspiration

Listen

Paving the way

Centred around Stacey's recognition of the importance of role models, Pave the Way, which started as a self-funded project in 2017, is an initiative that aims to inspire and encourage children to go for their goals. Achieving charity status this year, the project now aims to smash stereotypes and show children that the possibilities for their future are endless. "It's about challenging the stereotypes of masculinity and femininity, because there are barriers for men as well. But it's also about intersectionality, with race, with class with disability." She acknowledges that representation is key, and Pave the Way connects children to role models in a variety of industries, which helps to demonstrate that they can achieve their goals.

Powering through the pandemic



Despite her program reaching charity status this year, the COVID-19 pandemic has been tough for Stacey, as it has been for many of us. In terms of boxing, she has been practising indoors with her boyfriend, but is yet to be able to compete. Despite these frustrations, she has taken some of her lessons from her incredible sporting career into her daily actions. "There's nothing really that I've learned in sport that isn't helpful in the rest of life," she says.

For Stacey, flexibility is key. Being able to look at a situation and accepting that it can't be changed, while considering parts that you can do something about, is a mindset she really endorses. "If we can say, right, okay, that I can't change, [but] what can I do to make this more of an opportunity, rather than just a horrible, miserable setback?"

In terms of the pandemic, she thinks this is especially apt, saying, "During COVID, [looking for opportunities in the face of setbacks] is very, very, very important. Because the goalposts are changing all the time, whether it's in business sport, or our daily lives."

And while connecting has been hard this year, it's been just as important to remember that the people around us (be it in person or virtually) can be a tonic in times of doubt. It's equally vital to keep in mind that no matter what curveball life may throw at us at any given time – in particular during periods of uncertainty – the choice is always ours to either give in to the challenges at hand, or take a leaf out of Stacey Copeland's book and smash through all the barriers.