

Program Title	T-Rex: Her Fight for Gold
Program Subject(s)	Boxing; Sports; Women Boxers; Women Athletes; African Americans
Year Produced	2015
Directed by	Zackary Canepari; Drea Cooper
Produced by	Sue Jaye Johnson; Bianca Darville
Distributed by	ZCDC
Reviewed by	Timothy Hackman, University of Maryland
Running Time	91 minutes
Color or B&W	Color
Awards Received	Best Documentary Feature, Special Jury Award for Bay Area Documentary Feature, and Audience Award, San Francisco International Film Festival (2015); Best Documentary Feature, Sidewalk Film Festival (2015); Roger Ebert Prize for Best Film by a First Time Filmmaker, Traverse City Film Festival (2015); Best Feature Documentary, Woods Hole Film Festival (2015); Audience Award, Baltimore International Black Film Festival (2015); Best of Festival, Best Cinematography, and Audience Choice, Made in Michigan Film Festival (2015); Special Jury Award, Best Feature, Providence Children's Film Festival (2016)
Audience Level	General Adult

Review

"Love commingled with hate is more powerful than love. Or hate."

– Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing*

Oates was talking about boxing itself, the way that we can recognize both its beauty and its brutality in the same instant, and the way that admixture deepens our love of the sport and of the warriors who undertake it. It is a fitting epigraph for *T-Rex*, too, which is about boxing, but also about love and hate: the love that Claressa "T-Rex" Shields, seventeen, of Flint, Michigan, has for the sport of boxing, which has the potential to take her out of her hated "hellhole" of a hometown; the love Claressa's fourteen year-old sister has for her, whether or not her big sister can be successful enough to help her escape the neighborhood "low-lifes," including an alcoholic mother and their mother's sketchy boyfriend; and, most importantly, the mutual love that Claressa shares with her coach, Jason Crutchfield, a volunteer who provides her with the closest thing to a stable family as he pushes her toward boxing greatness.

The film begins six months prior to the 2012 Olympics, with Claressa, with an amateur record of 24-0, training to earn a spot on the first-ever women's boxing team. Claressa is focused and driven in the gym, but a relatively normal kid outside of it. We see her in school, hanging out with friends and family and her on-again, off-again boyfriend Rell, and, of course, spending a lot of time on her phone. We meet her mother, sister, father (whom Claressa did not meet until she was nine years old, due to her father spending Claressa's early years in prison), and stepmother. We also meet coach Jason and his wife and son, with whom Claressa lives and who treat her like a member of the family. Jason, who works as a lineman by day, started teaching boxing to kids as a way to give back to his community, and he is clearly proud of his star boxer, even as he is slightly perplexed by how far she has come. "Every coach wants a champion," he says. "It looks like I've finally got one. I just never thought it would be a girl."

Boxing films typically follow a predictable arc, in which the hard work of training is followed by some easy wins, then a first big test and a setback, followed by more hard work and eventual triumph, and that is the arc followed by *T-Rex*. Claressa makes it to the international boxing trials in China, where an early defeat without her coach, who did not have the funding to travel, gives way to a lucky break and a spot on Team USA. Though the coaching is handed over to Team USA for the Olympics, Jason is still able to travel with her to London that summer, where she finds success, becoming the first woman boxer to earn a gold medal in boxing for the United States.

This is where boxing films typically freeze frame and fade out, with our protagonist's hand raised in victory, while the viewer is left to imagine a happy ever after (at least until the next sequel.) But where *T-Rex* distinguishes itself is in the segment that comes after that final bell. Claressa returns to impoverished Flint, where she basks in the adulation of her family and peers, undertakes a promotional tour (*Good Morning America*, *The Colbert Show*, etc.), and waits for the endorsement offers and money to roll in so she can escape. And waits. And waits. Relatives hit her up for money (in one particularly teeth-grinding scene she accompanies her mother to a collections agency to pay a delinquent water bill), but she doesn't have any more to spare than before she won her gold medal. Coach Jason, back at his nine-to-five, muses, "Only in America. Win a gold medal, still got to work." Both Jason and Claressa vacillate between trying to remain upbeat ("For the rest of my life I'll be the first woman Olympic gold medalist in boxing," she says) and despairing that the glow from her win will fade before they are able to capitalize on it. They take a meeting with Team USA's publicity people, who advise Claressa to stop saying that she took up boxing because she "likes hitting people," but still the offers fail to materialize. When the principal calls her name at her high school graduation he prefaces it with "Olympic gold medalist" and the crowd cheers, but the recognition is fleeting, and it doesn't pay the bills. The film ends with Claressa back at work in the same decaying gym, training for the 2016 Rio Olympics.

Overall, *T-Rex* succeeds thanks to the charisma and determination of Claressa Shields. She is likable, even when she's behaving like a bratty teenager, and we cannot help rooting for her. Likewise, the relationship between fighter and coach, which encompasses the roles of teacher-pupil and father-daughter, with all the push and pull those dynamics entail, is compelling and occasionally moving. Still, the film fails to uncover much new ground in its depiction of either boxing or the grinding poverty that has been turning out world class boxers since Jack Dempsey. It will be of interest primarily to viewers who like sports documentaries in general, and boxing in particular, though it might pair well with a fictional boxing film like *Girlfight* (2000), or even another documentary like Michael Moore's *Roger & Me* (1989), which could explain how Flint, Michigan came to be such a "hellhole" in the first place.

"I'm 19, my life don't end here," Claressa says near the end of the film. "As long as I'm boxing, I'm gonna be OK." It turns out she was right. She won her second gold medal at the Rio Olympics in 2016, and gold at several other major international tournaments between 2014 and 2016, according to her Wikipedia page.¹ She turned pro in November 2016 and won the NABF Female Middleweight championship, in her second fight, the first women's boxing main event ever on a premium cable network.

Reviewer Rating Recommended

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Claressa_Shields