

Laila Ali, Reality TV Star: Searching for Female Athletic Celebrity

Marisela Chavez, Northwestern University

Earlier this year, *Dancing with the Stars* premiered its twenty-sixth season. *Dancing with the Stars: Athletes*, as it was subtitled, literalized a tension that has long animated the series' complex imaging and conferral of contemporary celebrity: athletes both are and are not like actors, musicians, and reality TV personalities. On *Dancing with the Stars*, the meanings and privileges of athletic celebrity are continually up for grabs—reinforced, redefined, and evaded in equal measure by judges, contestants, critics, and fans.

This discursive terrain is especially relevant with regards to female athletic celebrity, as reality television provides a serial and reflexive visibility uncommon to televisual coverage of women's sports. For example, five Olympic gymnasts have competed on *Dancing with the Stars*: Nastia Liukin, Shawn Johnson, Aly Raisman, Laurie Hernandez, and Simon Biles. The television event that is the Olympics affords mass recognition for a brief period every four years; *Dancing with the Stars* offers months of narrativized competition and personality development. Johnson, who competed on *Dancing with the Stars: All Stars* after winning the eighth season of the series, used her second appearances to tell the story of her retirement from gymnastics and transition into adulthood. This, as much as her Olympic success, forms the basis of her "television personality." In subsequent years, Johnson has appeared on *The Celebrity Apprentice*, *Adventure Capitalists*, and *The Challenge: Champs vs Stars*. In spreading her star text across (reality) television, Johnson's has followed the model established by *Dancing with the Stars*' first and most theoretically complex female athlete-contestant: Laila Ali.

One month after winning her final fight as a professional boxer, Laila Ali appeared on *Dancing with the Stars*' fourth season. In the decade since, she appeared on *Stars Earn Stripes*, *Celebrity Wife Swap*, and *The New Celebrity Apprentice*. While Ali retired a decorated athlete, her boxing career was studded with questions regarding the privileges of celebrity parentage (she is Muhammad Ali's daughter). Discourses of talent and privilege (as well as race and gender) inform Ali's star text and position her alongside and apart from the "celetoids" and "d-listers" commonly associated with "celebrity reality television." This subgenre has been analyzed by numerous scholars, who turn to reality TV in order to theorize contemporary hierarchies of fame and valuations of celebrity. However, the presence of athletes across this subgenre has received little scholarly attention. I argue that Ali's unique athletic celebrity troubles common systems of celebrity classification. While television studies rarely grapples with athletes, sports studies often imagines stardom as a male phenomenon. Reality television, and the visibility it offers female athletes, both exposes and complicates the structures that render female athletic success and celebrity frequently incompatible.

Additionally, the invisibility/hypervisibility dichotomy faced by black female athletes complicates the “ordinariness” of reality television.

Because celebrity reality television reflexively frames its participants as “stars,” such series must define their celebrity and compare it to the visibility gained on reality TV. Ali’s prior fame was structured around two-to-three boxing matches per year, most of which were primarily available as spectacular pay-per-view television events. Reality TV’s weekly, serial visibility affords Ali a different kind of mediated presence—a “television personality” that traditional sports coverage could not provide. Additionally, Ali’s celebrity is rearticulated each time she appears on a reality show. Each series negotiates Ali’s past athletic success, her growing televisual presence, her family history, and her black female identity. Through analysis of the dense and shifting discourse, I begin to unpack how television helps construct—and expose—the limits and possibilities of female athletic celebrity.