



Bukiwe Nonina spars with men. It's not an ego thing. "I just don't see any female in South Africa who can give me a good challenge," she says.

Four months ago, Bukiwe was named South African Female Boxer of the Year. Only 25, she has held the South African national women's welterweight title for the past five years.

So how about sparring with a female middleweight? "The weight doesn't matter," she says it's a matter of quality. I am the best female boxer in South Africa," she insists. "I have to step out to find a new challenge.'

A new challenge is approaching as we speak: Bukiwe is due to fight a former eight-times world champion for the World Boxing Federation world welterweight

"My aim is to prove the point," she says, smiling: "I am the best."

Women's boxing in South Africa has technically only been legal and recognised since 2001. According to Boxing South Africa's latest figures, there are 46 professional women boxers in South Africa, across all weight divisions. An improvement over past years; still, some struggle to find regular fights.

In that context, it is not

surprising that Bukiwe's bout is the only women's duel on the bill for the Fight for Hope tournament in boxing-starved Khayelitsha

As when most things come to townships, the tournament goes under the guise of "outreach" in this case a charity fight between former twice-European Muay Thai champion, Uwe Hück and Francois Botha, one-time IBF



world heavyweight champ and allround scary dude.

The event is also the launch of

an apprenticeship programme sponsored by Porsche.
It is going to be a big deal. An

article on News24 says that Arnold Schwarzenegger will be in attendance at the OR Tambo Hall. Imagine that -– the Governator in Khavelitsha.

Bukiwe, however, is more interested in another muscular European.

Alesia "The Tigress" Graf is 36 years old but has the body of an athlete half her age. She and Bukiwe were supposed to square off last year, but their meeting was postponed and postponed until Friday, March 31.

At the weigh-in for the Fight for Hope, Alesia strips down to a navy bikini. Bukiwe opts for a powder blue T-shirt, boxer briefs and sunglasses.

The contrast between them is

startling in both garb and body: the compact Belarusian-German; the lanky one who lives in Limpopo

Howard Goldberg, president of the WBF, doesn't really fancy Bukiwe's chances: "Alesia is considered, pound-for-pound, one of the best women fighters in the world," he says. "She'll have a challenge beating her.



## TEN ROUNDS WITH **BUKIWE NONINA**

Nick Mulgrew hangs out with the young boxing sensation before and after her landmark fight in Khayelitsha

Pictures: Chris de Beer

Bukiwe has a strategy, of course. "I have to beat myself before I beat her," she says. "And I know how to beat myself."

And how do you do that?
"Pressure," she says. "I hate a fighter who comes at me. I won't let her get close to me." Luckily, she's got reach, a hinge for a waist. Her coach, Immanuel Neluonde, emphasises footwork He makes her sprint every morning, "until the chest bursts open ... The best thing in boxing is fitness.

Bukiwe plans to box smart, go all 10 rounds and win on points. She doesn't think she'll knock Alesia out. "I don't believe in aggressive boxing anyway," she says. "I fight with love."

She fights with love. Bukiwe was born in iDutywa in the Eastern Cape, one of boxing's traditional heartlands. She only started boxing, though, when she moved to the North West for high school. "To be honest," she says, "I don't really love boxing." Perhaps part of that is because, no matter where she goes, the same stereotypes of women boxers

"It's not my sexuality that brought me to boxing," she says. "I was gay before I boxed. But even so, it's hard to go to the location and say to kids, 'Let's go to the gym', because parents think we are devils.

"People have an attitude where they want to fight me in the street. But I'm already too sensitive in the ring – – I can't fight in the street."

Of her 16 professional fights, Bukiwe has lost only three. The first two were among her first bouts; the other was the first, and last, time she took a step into the international arena.

Lusaka, two-and-a-half years ago. Her opponent was Catherine Phiri, a hometown star who would go on to take the WBC

bantamweight title (which she lost this month). The Government Complex on Independence Avenue was hot, the ring small, the lights too close.

"My father and my manager were in my corner," she recalls. "I said to them, let's stop this before I get injured. So they agreed."

The next day, the Zambian papers were mocking. Bukiwe had "surrendered", The Post said; she was worried that Phiri "would have killed her in the ring"

Bukiwe maintains she never said those things. "Now it's personal. They can bring their ring. I'll train in Limpopo, outside in the sun.

"I want Catherine Phiri now. I just need the title on Friday.'

Schwarzenegger is not there. A few hundred other people are, though, coming in from the mist. Children mill around at the edge of the crowd, shadow-boxing, eating Simbas and raisins, playing shibobo with Coke cans.

Bukiwe shares a humid changing room — more a repurposed storeroom — with four male boxers. Her parents stand by as Immanuel tightens her gloves. Bukiwe's mother, Notheko, prays over her. Then the singing begins.

Alesia has a sequinned tiger on her vest, which she discards to reveal that muscled torso.

Her gloves look too big for her, whirling out from her sides and back into her compact, stone-hard stance. She is trying to coax Bukiwe into countering her attacks. Chess, with sweat raining on the canvas.

Bukiwe keeps her distance, retreating into the corners, more tiger than the Tigress herself. She bends, avoids, lands a hard jab. Alesia swings wilder and wilder. She goes after Bukiwe, her face glowing red, but cannot reach her opponent. Bukiwe's face is serene, feet like a ballroom quickstepper's. In control.

In the seventh round, Bukiwe falls through the ropes, dazed. During the round break she sits and looks past Immanuel at the crowd, at the photographers surrounding the ring, not

listening to anyone, just smiling. Seconds out. The bell. Bukiwe just about runs out of her corner, the new aggressor. Alesia is desperate, charging around the ring, her gloves met only by the silence of clean air. The Tigress literally begins to growl.

94-96, 93-97, 94-96. Close, but unanimous. Bukiwe is mobbed on the way back to her changeroom — no VIP protection here. Inside, safe, mom Notheko wipes tears from her eyes. There are plenty of places to

rest, but Bukiwe doesn't sit. There's blood on her white Nikes — she doesn't really notice that her eyebrow has been split. "I feel awesome," she says. Outside, Hück and Botha gear

up to face each other. But the real fight has already been fought. Through the wall, a live band shrieks out a song by Toto. It's *Africa*, of course. The continent Bukiwe will soon leave to find the appreciation she desires.

Well, maybe. Maybe she'll stop off in Lusaka first and pay a visit to Catherine Phiri.

Mulgrew is the author of 'Stations', a collection of short stories published by David Philip

TIGER AND SNAKE: Below left, Bukiwe 'Anaconda' Nonina prays with her mother, Notheko, before the fight. Below, in the ring with Alesia 'The Tigress' Graf



