

Sport / Taekwondo

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JUST your average West Derby girl, a couple of months away from making taekwondo history for Great Britain.

Bianca Walkden shot to fame in 2017 when she was nominated for the BBC Sports Personality of the Year award in her hometown of Liverpool after striking bronze at the Rio 2016 Olympics.

Her next bout is due to take place in Manchester on May 16, where she will battle it out for the chance to be crowned the World Taekwondo Federation World Champion for the third time in her career.

But this week she visited Liverpool College to offer a martial arts masterclass to a group of year seven and eight students and show off her skills before a question and answer session with the pupils.

Bianca is the ambassador of sport protection brand Opro and is embarking on a journey around the country, visiting schools as part of their initiative to try and get 100,000 girls involved in sport by 2020.

She told the ECHO: "They're going to help me go round to each school and communicate face to face with the kids and show them a way.

"It doesn't have to be taekwondo but it can be any sport and as long as they enjoy and look forward to it that's all that matters."

The two-time Grand Slam champion believes enjoying the class is key in helping children channel their aggression. The focus was to have fun and let them kick and punch each other!" she added. "That's what every kid wants to do, scream, kick and punch each other but it was nice to get them involved they had a really good time."

Bianca found her love for the Korean martial art when she was 11 after she attended an afterschool class with a friend.

By the age of 14, she had moved to the Great Britain academy from Liverpool all-girls school Broughton Hall to a mixed gender school in Manchester.

At Liverpool College this week around 10 to 12 students had the opportunity to receive training from the Olympic bronze medalist herself. Even one of the PE teachers was involved, although on the receiving of some fierce strikes from the two-time Grand Slam winner!

After displaying an hour of basic taekwondo, she was then quizzed by the youngsters, admitting how her love for the sport was sparked: "Everyone was kicking and punching each other, from then I just fell in love with it."

The 27-year-old has enjoyed a successful career so far. Out of her 167 fights, she has won 131 bouts, taking home gold in 22 competitions, boasting a 78.4% win percentage.

She insists her proudest moment

Everyone was kicking and punching each other – I just fell in love with it!

SCHOOL SESSION REMINDS BIANCA OF FIRST STEP ON ROAD TO GLORY

Bianca Walkden at Liverpool College and (below) teaching a class the art of taekwondo

ANDREW TEEBAY

“You can still be a girly girl but when you're on the mat, you've just got to channel that aggression and basically be 'Beauty and the Beast'.

Bianca Walkden

came in 2015, after undergoing cruciate ligament surgery in 2014 – but there was one main reason behind why it was so special.

"I lost my grandfather the same day as I won the World Championships in 2015," she explained.

"I think he was looking out for me and helped me to win at the end."

Ultimately, 2017 was THE year for her. She became the first fighter to ever win four Grand Prix events, then added to her already impressive portfolio with a BBC Sports Personality of the Year nomination and World Championship victory.

Although 2018, in comparison, was a good year it was not up to the

high standards she's set herself, picking up three gold medals and four silvers.

She said: "My only goal and main focus is to win the World Championships in May. I'm going to be in action on May 16 in Manchester, hopefully I can retain my title."

Coincidentally, that date will be four years to the day that she won her maiden world title and sadly suffered the loss of her grandfather.

Sixteen years ago, Bianca found the sport, during a time where combat sport was deemed a 'boys sport' but she quickly squashed that thought.

She continued: "You can still be a girly girl but when you're on the mat, you've just got to channel that aggression and basically be 'Beauty and the Beast'.

"Do all your girly stuff but then in the ring you can let all that aggression out and have a fight.

"People say it's a boy sport and you've got to be really tough and aggressive to do it. There's elements of that but it's a tactical sport as well."

The Liverpool fan, as well as suf-

fering a ligament injury in 2014, also had a devastating setback which saw her miss the London 2012 Olympics.

Her previous injuries and setbacks have instilled fire in to the Scouser and she already has her sights on the Tokyo Olympics, next summer.

To qualify, she has to be in the top six by the end of January, next year.

She said: "I've gone through a lot of surgery. But I wouldn't change it for the world, it's made me stronger, it's made me the fighter I am, it's made me who I am today.

"I know my body more, I can push further now, if I didn't go through all pain and heartache, I wouldn't have the aggression or belief I have now to try and win everything.

And she concluded by delivering a stark warning to competitors at next year's summer games: "I'm bringing home Gold no matter what. Bronze in 2016 was a warm up, 2020 I'm bringing it home."

■ Bianca Walkden is an ambassador of leading mouthguard company OPRO. For more information visit www.opromouthguards.com.

