Women’s fighting sports have a rich and storied history. With new opportunities to compete in legitimate arenas—from the Olympics to Ultimate Fighting Championships—women today are able to fight in ways their predecessors never could.

In *She’s a Knockout!: A History of Women in Fighting Sports*, author L.A. Jennings (PhD ’13, English) chronicles the stories of strong and resilient fighting women—including wrestlers, mixed martial arts (MMA) competitors and boxers—and the different issues they have encountered.

A martial arts practitioner herself, Jennings began her book as a literary studies PhD student in DU’s department of English. She depicts stories of female fighters in the culture of their time and reveals how women were often seen as objects of spectacle and ridicule before finally garnering admiration in the industry. Her book profiles fighters such as England’s “Championess” Elizabeth Stokes of the 1720s, American wrestler Cora Livingstone of the 1930s and contemporary MMA fighter Debi Purcell.

“I began training martial arts in my second year of college, and it remains a profound course of empowerment and emotional fulfillment. As my academic career progressed, my fighting career did, too. The two informed each other, to the extent that I began writing about martial arts as an academic and a practitioner,” she said.

Her early research into *She’s a Knockout!* started at DU with the guidance of Peggy Keeran, a DU reference librarian and professor, who assisted Jennings in initiating the correct searches to find any mention of women and fighting in historic print materials. Jennings spent months collecting documents, and more months collating them into categories, such as boxing or MMA.

The PhD program in the English department, which is ranked #1 in the country for its creative writing program, is designed to give students the space and flexibility to delve deeply into their research and creative pursuits. The faculty encourage doctoral teaching fellows to take a wide range of courses and to create independent studies and small group colloquiums. So even though Jennings came to DU for a degree in literary studies, she also had the opportunity to take courses in creative writing, which is not common in more striated academic programs.

“I was drawn to the freedom to design my own course of study,” she said. “There was definitely a gap in female fighting literature, and a general misunderstanding that women participating in fighting sports was a modern phenomenon,” Jennings said. “I wanted to share not only the stories of these women, but also reveal the systematic way in which their narratives were ignored.”

Jennings unveiled new practices in the field, too. Faced with a lack of training options in Denver, Jennings and her husband Mike began their own training regimen. Their training approach is more dynamic than most others as it combines strength training with calisthenics to improve cardio performance.
Other fighters observed Jennings’ unique training methods—and how well they performed at fights—and asked to join them. In just a few months, the Jennings’ opened their own training studio called Train.Fight.Win.

“We have never made an income from our business. We both work full-time and we prefer to focus on getting great people into our gym rather than the bottom line. But we would rather coach and teach at Train.Fight.Win. than do anything else in the world,” she said.