

Throwing her weight around

'I discovered I'm quite nasty and it gave me an amazing feeling of power.' **Rebecca Hubbard** gets to grips with wrestler Maggie Jennings

TEN PAST ten in the morning and Maggie Jennings yanks my head into her crotch. She's demonstrating how to get an effective head scissors on. With calculated intent, she slowly squeezes me between hard, cyclist's thighs. I scream and slap a hand on the ground; the first submission of the day.

Jennings is a wrestler. For the past four years she has fought and run wrestling workshops to subsidise her career as an artist. "It's about getting back to the rough and tumble of childhood," she explains, checking that my head lock is clear of my victim's windpipe. "Kids knock each other over and try their strength out with no embarrassment, but as soon as you get to puberty you're so inhibited, you can't touch anyone any more except your partner and rolling around on the grass is unseemly."

Wrestling has been very important to 36-year-old Jennings: "I feel a stronger, more fully realised person. I discovered I'm quite nasty and it gave me an amazing feeling of power, of freedom to be nasty and not be put down for it. I've always been told I'm too aggressive. I was brought up a nice middle-class girl and felt guilty if I hurt someone. Suddenly I'm given credit for it."

Wrestling certainly hurts. It teaches limits: what you can endure, when to stop and give in. Pain also helps you tap into unexplored sources of aggression and strength: "In

submissions you're trying to hurt someone so much that they submit, but that didn't occur to me when I started," recalls Jennings. "Then I was stuck in the ring with this woman who had been wrestling for several years. Suddenly she picked me up, slammed me down and landed on top of me. It really hurt. For a split second I was absolutely horrified. Then I thought, so that's what it's about, I can submit now . . . but I'm not going to! My nostrils flared and I got this terrific surge of energy."

Wrestling is clearly not for the squeamish. "You end up covered in someone else's sweat and in very strange positions, turned into a knot," says Jennings, grinning.

In contrast to the ritual and regulation of martial arts, wrestling is also spontaneous. Cunning and intuition are as vital as aggressive determination: "There are no hard and fast answers for getting out of, say, a full nelson," explains Jennings, slithering out of my hold. "You might think, this person is a bit unstable on this foot, I'll step back and wiggle my bottom, except that you don't even think it, you just feel it. Every little bit of body is on alert, waiting to respond."

Jennings started wrestling because it paid good money in a short time and because it provided an enjoyable physical outlet. She tried yoga ("Too pious and blissful") and then a friend mentioned women's wrestling. "I rang sports clubs in London but no one knew anything about it. Later, I saw an advert in Ms London for topless wrestlers, no experience needed. It sounded interesting and it was going to pay."

So she went along. "We watched videos showing the kind of things you were going to get up to and they gave you about 20 minutes' training — here's a scissors, here's a head lock — then you were in the ring with somebody."

According to Jennings, the women at the club are ordinary women who wrestle for money but also for fun. After all, there are easier ways to make £100 by taking off your clothes than by engaging in mortal combat.

TOPELESS wrestling is usually filmed and sold via specialist magazines; photography rights are signed away. Jennings has even found herself on the cover of Amazon Women. "The commentary can be tacky," she says, "and serious wrestling is mixed up with pathetic drawings of naked women wrestling."

It is, she admits, the seedy sexual end of the sports market. Her club wrestle in boxing

rings and pub rooms in front of "interested" men. "Of course, I don't like the whole history of exploitation to which you're acquiescing when you sell your body for men's titillation. I've never really been able to justify that to myself, except that what I was doing — wrestling — I enjoyed very much."

Recently, Jennings' club began fighting in full costume (on a visit to the States, they discovered American women don't wrestle topless). The punters still come and the manager plans to open up fights to a wider public. Meanwhile, Jennings — who, at 10 stone, both outweighs and out-fights the other club wrestlers — looks abroad for worthy opponents. In New York and Belgium, she fights women who take wrestling seriously and who run the business side (videos or sports centres) themselves.

Jennings' workshops aim to popularise wrestling, especially among women who are put off by its seedy connotations. The rules, she says, were evolved for men and need changing: "Some styles ban anything below the waist which is bad because a lot of women are very good at using their legs." She teaches rules evolved at her club, a cross between Greco-Roman and Freestyle, much safer than the spectacular, choreographed pro stuff you see on TV and livelier than the complex Olympic points system.

There certainly seems plenty of enthusiasm for a return to the rough and tumble of childhood. At four o'clock, 14 men and women lay sprawled on mats at Jennings' workshop. The only thing that stopped them battling on was sheer exhaustion.



A woman of substance . . . Maggie Jennings

PHOTOGRAPHS: DAVID SILLITOE

Maggie Jennings exhibits at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery, Windmill St, London W1. For information on future wrestling workshops, tel 081 694 0210.