

## SPORTS

## Bare-knuckle boxing champion hails from Bedford, trains in Danville

*“Instantly, on day one in Danville, I fit in,” Britain Hart-Beltran said. Hart-Beltran won a bare-knuckle boxing title in September, and shared her story with Cardinal News.*



by **Grace Mamon**  
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Britain Hart-Beltran (in red) had her first ever bare-knuckle fight against Bec Rawlings (in black) in 2018, and lost. The pair rematched in 2022 and Hart-Beltran won. Courtesy of Hart-Beltran.

This summer, Britain Hart-Beltran told everyone she was taking a break from bare-knuckle boxing until 2023.

The Bedford native had lost a fight for the championship belt in February, walking away with eight sets of stitches in her face. A few months after that, she and her husband, professional fighter Joey Beltran, found out that the baby they were expecting didn't have a heartbeat.

“It was just too much,” Hart-Beltran said in an interview with Cardinal. “I wasn't in control of my emotions. I needed a timeout.”

But two weeks after she announced her break from the sport, she got a call saying she had another chance at the title. And this time, it was against someone in her weight class.

Since she started bare-knuckle boxing, a sport where fighters box without gloves, in 2018, Hart-Beltran had been literally punching above her weight.

Her competitors were in the 125-pound weight class, which means they were cutting from 130 or 140 pounds, she said. Meanwhile, Hart-Beltran said her “walk around weight” is 120 pounds, and she is in the 115-pound weight class.

Still, her record is 6-3-0 in the sport, and she's proven she can beat fighters who are bigger than her, she said, adding that she's never been knocked down or knocked out.

“I got the phone call saying, you're finally getting what you want,” Hart-Beltran said. “They're dropping me to 115, which I had been begging for my whole career.”

And despite her decision to take a break and the rollercoaster year she'd had, Hart-Beltran decided to take the fight.

“It’s for the belt,” she said. “I know it’s been a wild year, and I know I said I’m done...but I thought there was no way they were going to give me another title shot this year.”

She was set to fight Thai champion Fani Peloumpi in Montana in September. But when Peloumpi was hindered by pandemic travel restrictions four days before the fight, Hart-Beltran’s opponent switched to Charisa Sigala, a fighter from California.

The two fighters went five rounds, and Hart-Beltran came out victorious, finally winning the belt and redeeming her February loss.



Britain Hart-Beltran. Courtesy of Hart-Beltran.



Britain Hart-Beltran (in white) beat Charisa Sigala (in black) in September to win the bare-knuckle boxing title. Courtesy of Hart-Beltran.

This fight wasn't the first time Hart-Beltran had to redeem herself. She described her journey as one of perseverance and resilience, in the ring and out.

"She's come a long way," said her coach, Marcus Luck, owner of Luck's Boxing Gym in Danville, where Hart-Beltran trains. "Just to see where she started from and where she's at, it's amazing."



Hart-Beltran said she was bullied throughout her childhood, and it only stopped when she proved she was good at athletics at Staunton River High School.

“It was through sports that I found my equal playing field,” Hart-Beltran said. “Once I showed I was good at soccer, and good at basketball, and good at cross country, I ended up earning friends.”

Her parents separated when Hart-Beltran was in high school, and she “had those rebellious teenage years, where I made a lot of mistakes.”

**She n** Coach Marcus Luck holds Britain Hart-Beltran aloft after her victory. Courtesy of Hart-Beltran.

“That was the real switch,” she said. “I didn’t have a good partner and there was a lot of abuse...it was a really hard first three years being a single mom. But I knew that to support him I would have to go to college. So I worked my butt off and got a full-ride scholarship.”

Hart-Beltran graduated from University of Lynchburg with a degree in sports management, then went to Old Dominion University for a master’s degree in education with a concentration in athletics.

“That’s when I ended up getting into a far worse relationship than the first one,” she said. “That ended me in a bunch of legal problems.”

In 2016, the week she graduated with her master’s, Hart-Beltran got her first DUI, which made it hard for her to get a job, even with two degrees, she said.

“It was like everything I worked for, I just lost it in the blink of an eye,” she said. “I learned my lesson that 99 rights can be ruined by one wrong.”

That’s when Hart-Beltran found boxing.

“I was kind of funny about it,” she said about her first time walking into a boxing gym. “I said I’m here because I made some bad choices and I need to get my ass kicked.”

Hart-Beltran had a natural talent for boxing, even though she’d never so much as put on a pair of gloves before. She said it was actually a relief to be in a fight where there were rules that had to be followed.

“I had been in my fair share of street fights, and had also been in a physically abusive relationship,” she said. “With boxing, you’ve got pillows on your hands and headgear and there’s a time limit.”

Just four months after the first time she walked into a boxing gym, Hart-Beltran had her first professional fight. Two years later, she started boxing bare-knuckle.

But when the pandemic lockdown hit, she lost her first big boxing contract, her job at a gym and her bartending gig.

“I started cutting trees, because I knew it would keep me physically fit and I could still make money,” she said. “I found the hardest labor job that I could while being an essential employee.”

Cutting trees got Hart-Beltran through the pandemic, and when the sport started up again, she went right back.

Britain Hart-Beltran explains that the precision and speed of hits are just as important as power. Video by Grace Mamon.

Fighting bare-knuckle is more stressful than glove boxing, and it's easier to feel timid, Hart-Beltran said. But there are techniques to "harden your hands" so that throwing punches hurts less and your hands recover faster.

"You'll see in different combat arts, when people will take wooden dowels and they'll just go to their fighters and hit them all over to kill those nerve endings, it's the same thing with your hands to get used to the impact," she said.

Hart-Beltran works on this, along with other training exercises and workouts, with Luck at his gym in North Danville.

She trained in Bedford at first, but gossip and rumors about her past made her feel unwelcome, she said, so she found Luck in Danville.

"Instantly, on day one in Danville, I fit in," she said. "Being someone who never really fit in her whole life, that was huge for me. Not having to work or earn it, just being accepted on day one."

Luck opened his first boxing gym in 1999, and has had this location on North Main Street in Danville for about six years. Photo by Grace Mamon.

Luck said Hart-Beltran is one of the "happiest people in the world."

"Meeting her, you'd never think she's a fighter," he said. "People think of fighters as mean or always angry, and she's just cheerful. She's also determined. If you say she can't do something, she'll come back, it might be six months later, saying 'look what I can do.'"

This determination has played a big part in her success against fighters that are bigger than her. One reason that she's had to take fights outside of her weight class is because there aren't many women in the sport, she said.

"You've got to take what you can get," she said. "It's not right, but it's a very easy way for the combat sports world to manipulate women into taking bad fights and not being strategically smart."

Britain Hart-Beltran trains at Luck's Boxing Gym in North Danville with coach Marcus Luck. Video by Grace Mamon.

Hart-Beltran referenced female fighters like Claressa Shields and Heather Hardy, who don't accept fights out of their weight classes.

"I've learned from them that I need to be more vocal about it," she said. "There's no reason to take fights out of your weight class. It's unsafe and it's a disadvantage."

There are other challenging aspects of being a woman in a sport dominated by men, Hart-Beltran said. At first, there was a stereotype that female fighters couldn't be traditionally feminine, she said.

"Now, it's kind of swung back the other way, where people are only watching fights because of how the [female] fighters look," she said. "Sex sells."

Hart-Beltran said she's tried to stay true to herself and embody what an empowered woman looks like to her.

"I think the best way we can represent ourselves in this sport is to treat it like a fight, not quit, and get in there and do things that are really hard," she said.

Britain Hart-Beltran and her husband, Joey Beltran, often train together and help each other with workouts. Photo by Grace Mamon.

Hart-Beltran called Danville her home, although she and Beltran still live in Bedford. The couple met through boxing, and got married in July 2021.

“We got married two days before I fought a big co-main event,” Hart-Beltran said. “I was thinking, I can’t say we got married and then go out there and lose this fight. So it was a third-round knockout.”

Beltran said sharing the sport with his wife is special, because they both know what it’s like to be in the ring in front of a crowd.

“People don’t really care about your problems, they only want to be entertained,” Beltran said. “They don’t care about what you’ve got going on in your life going into a fight.”

The couple found out about their miscarriage very shortly before one of Beltran’s fights, he said.

“She knew that’s why I didn’t do well in the fight that day,” Beltran said. “It doesn’t really matter that people watching say ‘Joey sucks.’ She knows why.”

Beltran said he had never had someone talk to him about chronic traumatic encephalopathy, a progressive brain condition that’s caused by repeated concussions or blows to the head, until he met Hart-Beltran.

“No one ever talked to me about head trauma or the way I train,” he said. “It can be perceived that she’s being hard on me, but it’s because she loves me. And it’s wonderfully foreign, because I’ve never had that.”

Beltran said he’s happy to watch his fighting career slow down and “be the cheerleader” for Hart-Beltran.

“I’ve had decent success and traveled the world and everything,” Beltran said. “At the end of the day, I’ve had my moments in the sun, I’ve had my world titles. It’s awesome to sit back and watch her shine.”

Joey Beltran, Britain Hart-Beltran and Marcus Luck at Luck's Boxing Gym in North Danville. Photo by Grace Mamon.

After her championship win, Hart-Beltran said that she's focusing on taking some time off, spending time with her husband, son and daughter. But she's open to whatever comes, she said, which could include going back to glove boxing.

Eventually, she'd like to transition to coaching and training other fighters, Hart-Beltran said.

"I would love to open a gym in Bedford so me and Luck can collab, instead of always making the far drive," she said. "It would be a couple years down the road, probably not anytime soon. But maybe that could be a way for me to start over new [in Bedford]."

Hart-Beltran also said she'd like to do motivational speaking one day, to tell the story of how she turned her life around through boxing.

"Crazy enough, if I never got that DUI, I never would've boxed," she said. "If I had never needed money, I never would have turned pro as quickly as I did."

And sharing her story could help others, she said.

"If I could get through this, every trial and tribulation, other people can too," she said. "It's not like I just had a bad day. I lost a baby, I've been to jail, I lost custody of my kids, I've been beat up and had an ambulance come get me from my past marriage. There's all these dark shadows that linger, but I don't want to use them as crutches."

Hart-Beltran said she's always had the feeling that she was "meant to be something great."

"As long as I feel that fire in me, I'll keep going," she said.