



CARYSE

# WOMEN IN CAPOEIRA

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A search through historical symbols of feminine strength, gumption, courage and self-confidence takes us back to the 1940s, and some startling nicknames – “*Maria 12 Homens*”, “*Calça Rala*”, “*Satanás*”, “*Nega Didi*” and “*Maria Pára o Bonde*” – given those women who doubled as men to fit in with the rakes and hepcats then dominating capoeira circles. Rosa Palmeirão, a legendary capoeirista who inspired Jorge Amado while writing his novel *Sea of Death (Mar Morto)*, is another example. Feared and respected as the most “dauntless” woman to ever shake up the male-dominated tableau, Maria 12 Homens was an expert capoeira, and frequented *rodas* at the Bahia’s old Gold Quay and Mercado Modelo. Maria’s surname is as yet undocumented in Salvador, but legend holds that she earned the nickname besting 12 men by a knockout. These women skillfully made their way and very capably wrote their names into history. They came out ahead in their struggle for freedom and left the facts on record for posterity.

Many are the myths involving women who fought for their honor in life-and-death struggles and stood as examples of courage and determination. Legend has it that Aqualtune, a Princess of the Congo, led an army of 10,000 men to repel an invasion of their territory by the Jagas. Her defense of the kingdom ended in defeat, and she was sold as breeding stock aboard a slaver ship, forcibly impregnated by another slave, and arrived in Recife in that condition. Before giving birth, however, she organized other slaves into escaping to a fastness named Palmares.

Women nowadays – symbols of pride and victory – are constantly improving their standing in politics and the marketplace, getting better jobs and holding office in important functions. Women in sports are racking up more medals, trophies and titles, and naturally, participating in growing numbers in capoeira – to the great benefit of this cultural style. Women sing and play, practice, give lessons and take part in roundtable discussions with the best-known mestres of the art. Wherever they may be, Maria 12 Homens, Calça Rala, Satanás, Nega Didi, Maria Pára o Bonde and Rosa Palmeirão have every reason to be filled with pride.

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