Twelve weeks ago trainer Johnny Lewis began the process of evaluating his most prized fighter, world jr. welterweight champion Kostya Tszyu. Frankly, Lewis and Tszyu himself were apprehensive, with the long rigors of a championship training camp beginning. How would the Russia-Australian's body hold up, given his recent fragility, major injuries to his Achilles heal followed by a rotator cuff shoulder injury in February, preparing once again, for Sharmba Mitchell. And here was Tszyu, 35 years-old, trying to adapt and align his mind and physique to thresholds of pain and endurance. He'd been telling friends in Australia he was anxious to get back and it had seemed like forever since he'd been in a boxing ring.

Trainers, no less the wise sage of Australian boxing Lewis, instinctively want to keep their fighters busy, training to fight, fighting, resting to energize, training to fight. For Tszyu and Lewis this imperative of commitment has been defined by 12 week cycles. Beginning a training camp, for the preparatory phase – weeks one and two – Tszyu utilizes the world famous Australian Institute of Sport in Canberra. No family, no friends, no distractions, Tszyu takes this time to put his body through an Olympic level testing and general fitness assessment regiment.

This time the primary concern for Tszyu and Lewis was getting the maximum amount of over all fitness training completed, while testing the fighter's tolerance for injury. Late September in Canberra proved to be an assuaging renewal for Team Tszyu. When Kostya, 30-1 (24), returned to Sydney, to begin the boxing phase of his camp, most of the team's apprehensions had turned to anticipation. Though one operative question lingered: does a veteran fighter, having been forced out of his routine, return refreshed or does inactivity translate into inevitable atrophy? How much Kostya Tszyu was left? Getting back into daily sparring in October, at the Tszyu Boxing Academy in the Rockdale area of Sydney, normalcy returned, the days passing without major incident. Seeing Kostya's overall effectiveness return, his strength and cardio capacity ratio restituted in short order, was the signal to Lewis that his guy Tszyu really was up for a return match with the speedster Sharmba Mitchell.

For eight weeks Tszyu worked out in Rockdale, each day completing three sessions, on a six day per week cycle. Up for running and sprints by 6:30am, Tszyu fastidiously applied himself to his cardio conditioning phase of training camp. After a morning breakfast and nap, Tszyu was back into the gym at 11a.m. until 1p.m., doing his calisthenics, eye-hand tennis ball co-ordination drill, heavy bag and mitt drills, before taking to the ring for sparring. More than the generation of power or tactical planning, Tszyu has always been particular to practice his technique, the micro-motor skills that make up every foundational gesture to do with movement, punching, defensive posturing, any and all kinetics to do with prize fighting.

By scheduling his weight training phase from 4 p.m. until about 6 p.m., Tszyu finds his earlier sparring sessions are much more exacting, his technical abilities more precise and powerful. Lifting weights later means his body is required to maximize his base strength, simulating the taxing nature of physically demanding late round championship fighting.

For his last two weeks of training, Tszyu goes to the fight site for physical acclimation and mental orientation. Few fighters are as completely detail orientated as Kostya Tszyu; he may play the searching, punishing hitter in the ring, but he's a methodological high performance athlete, attentive to all the variables of his profession. The work rate and intensity at this camp, preparing for Mitchell, 55-3 (30), has been high. Kostya Tszyu really doesn't like Sharmba Mitchell's dismissive trash talking public persona; yet, with every rhetorical jab that has come Tszyu's way, it's all been fuel to the fire. Mitchell told the press that Tszyu was fat, his heart not really into boxing any longer.

All that kind of tired, pseudo head game jibing did was push Tszyu back to the heavy bag, made him surge over the last quarter mile of running.

The best evidence of work ethic takes form and substance as the physique of a fighter near to fight time. And Tszyu has been below most of his target weights, lighter with some two weeks to go for the Mitchell rematch than he's been since his MGM Grand showdown with Zab Judah, in November 2001. His sparring with Aussie middleweight Sam Soliman proved to camp watchers that Tszyu had lost none of his vaulted punching power and as importantly, retained his strength when working on the inside.

Perhaps, Tszyu will look rusted and suddenly limited in Phoenix. Perhaps, the tolls of physical dedication will catch up on Kostya Tszyu just in time for Mitchell to make his boasts of an impending title reign a reality. But Kostya Tszyu has done his homework, having braved the demands of a training camp many twenty-five year-olds would have struggled to bare. At least he's reconstituted his best efforts heading in; one can believe that Tszyu will leave nothing in the tank, forcing the resourceful and inventive Mitchell to fight a masterpiece of ring geometrics to stave off Tszyu's pressurizing attack style.

Kostya Tszyu really does want to fight again; he's missed the sporting business of professional boxing that has defined his existence. He's missed being an active fighter, the champion of the jr. welterweight division, his division. Being on the sidelines, made to accept the insecurities of an aging athlete's body, has forced Tszyu into reevaluation and even a dogmatic realism on just what the future could hold for him. Suddenly, the horizon line of his career has receded toward him; the vagaries of time a poignant barometer for everything he's taken to heart. This workaholic by nature and nurture has quietly reinvented himself along the lines of his prime self. And that is what he and trainer Johnny Lewis believe they still see in Kostya Tszyu inside the squared ring.

There are still major hurtles to clear beyond Mitchell, such as a dream match up with Arturo Gatti, HBO vs. Showtime notwithstanding. There is a fight with Cory Spinks and a chance to have been a unified champion of both jr. welterweight and welterweight. History and its telling assessments strike close to the consciousness of the veteran champion Tszyu. Then there's the option of taking down a name fighter from the ranks of the talented just below his weight division. Diego Corrales is a name that has been bandied about by Showtime executives as fitting that particular bill.

Either way, any way, you want to look at the last career options of Kostya Tszyu, the little man

with the pony tail wants to cash out the investment that his sterling career victories have made manifold. Kostya Tszyu wants to go out with a bang, earning a king's ransom, dramatically giving closure to a career he's built brick by brick. He's told Jay Larkin at Showtime he expects the platforming and profits of a Pay Per View mega-outing before he retires. No wonder he's been so mechanically proficient, rededicating himself to the enterprise of being marginally better, of being more than the estimation of a champion's career?

For Tszyu, boxing remains a process of rethinking, retooling, always progressing from the fundamentals working outward, making meticulous and reflexive the actions of necessity.

Johnny Lewis and his charge may loath the necessity of having to fight Sharmba Mitchell again, but they do not fear nor dread that responsibility. It's just about time to shut this guy up, they are fond of saying in camp, since he seems to be unable to even act as if he understood the idea of basic respect. And though there are a few finalizing epic encounters to come, they believe, for Kostya Tszyu, first things are indeed first.

The business at hand – boxing decrees – determines what your future really can look like, regardless of your championship or contenders' or novices' standing. And Tszyu covers all his bases; that's just the way he's made.