

Teaching an Old Dog, Some New Tricks

Written by Steve Kim
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I nearly fell off my chair as I was watching Diego Corrales in his rematch with Joel Casamayor this past weekend. Not only was he using his jab, he actually slipped a punch. I was flabbergasted and flummoxed, to say the least.

Now, I was able to compose myself by remembering that even a blind squirrel can find an acorn once in awhile, and that even a broken watch is correct twice a day. But get this, he did it throughout the fight. Yes, this is Diego Corrales I'm talking about.

I'm sure you've heard by now but 'Chico' was able to even the score against the Cuban southpaw by out-boxing- yes, out-boxing- his opponent over 12 tense rounds of boxing to capture the vacant WBO jr. lightweight belt.

Seeing Corrales use his jab effectively, not give up his height, gauge distance properly, show improved defense and exhibit patience was like seeing 50 Cent sing a ballad, Barry Bonds laying down a sacrifice bunt, Rush Limbaugh wear a Donavon McNabb jersey, you might see it, but you still don't believe it.

But that's precisely what occurred with Corrales, who overcame one lapse, when he got sent to the canvas by a sharp Casamayor left hand in round ten. Like the classic first battle between Sugar Ray Leonard and Thomas Hearns in 1981 and interesting role-reversal took place where the boxer, became the puncher and the puncher became the boxer, halfway through the fight.

Which is what happened in the late rounds of this particular fight. Casamayor sensing he was behind started to become much more aggressive in the late rounds. Corrales, stayed within his game plan throughout, never losing his composure. And much of the credit has to go to trainer Joe Goossen, who just happened to train Casamayor for the previous five years, culminating with their first fight in October.

Now, they say you can't teach an old dog new tricks. Goossen came as close as any trainer will in disproving that theory. It was thought that Goossen was valuable to Corrales because of the insight he would be able to provide his new fighter against his old one. Instead, what really proved invaluable was how over six weeks Goossen was able to not only able to alter the style of Corrales but more importantly, changed the mindset of Corrales, who admittedly loses poise once he gets hit solid and is not afraid to engage in bloody slugfests. It's great for the fans, terrible for the fighter involved.

Goossen turned a free swinger into a guy who was content to draw a few walks and go the other way. No, he wont hit as many home runs as he has in the past, but he will hit for a higher batter average. And he wont get hit nearly as much in the face.

Perhaps now Goossen will get the credit he deserves for being one of the premiere trainers around. I don't know why, but this guy has never gotten the proper amount of credit he

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deserves. Is it because he didn't fight professionally? Fair enough, but I can name you a multitude of coaches in other sports that couldn't even crack the lineup of their JV teams in high school. And besides, coaching or training is about helping others achieve, not what you may have done in your playing days.

This was the greatest downfall of legends like Ted Williams and Jerry West when they coached.

Is it because he doesn't look like the classic trainer, but instead to some, more like an adult-film actor with his less-than-traditional ring attire? Well, he is from the valley where those films are produced, but last I checked you didn't have to just sport Everlast or Grant gear to be a trainer.

Maybe it's because he isn't from the east coast where a lot of the influential media resides. Hey, as much as I think of Teddy Atlas- and I think very highly of him- is his reputation as big if he lived in Sherman Oaks, California instead of Staten Island, New York? I don't think so.

But look at this guys track record, he took guys from their first fight and developed world champions like Michael Nunn, Rafael Ruelas and Gabe Ruelas. Now, some will argue that anyone could have trained 'Second to' Nunn in his heyday.

Which might be true, but consider this, where did Nunn's career go once he left Goossen? He was never able to fight at the level that was coaxed out of him by Goossen in the late 80's. And as gummy and game as the Ruelas brothers were, were they the greatest natural talents out there? I'd say he was pretty successful with them and Gabe could have had a much better career without the badly fractured arm he suffered against Jeff Chandler early in his career.

Then you have the case of Lance Whitaker and Joel Casamayor. Whitaker was basically a failed power forward that Goossen took over very early in his career and 'Mount' Whitaker at that point was more of an anathema. He simply couldn't fight that much. But over time he was slowly developed and by early 2001, when he had knocked out Oleg Maskaev in two rounds, he was considered one of the top five heavyweights in the world and on the verge of making big money. But Whitaker was then hijacked by Rock Newman, who tabbed Phil Borgia to train him- and he would promptly lose to Jameel McClintock and he's never been the same since.

Casamayor, was a guy that was a glorified amateur early in his pro career. While he may have defected from Cuba, he still fought like a Cuban amateur. In other words, he would stink out the joint at the drop of a Cuban cigar. He was so unappealing that he was deemed untouchable by the big promoters.

In 1999, Goossen would take over Casamayor and eventually they would capture a world title and become one of the most respected boxers in the world. He didn't turn him into an Arturo Gatti or Mathew Saad Muhammad, but he did turn him into a professional fighter. There one loss would be a controversial 12-round decision to Acelino Freitas but last year they would rebound with solid wins over Nate Campbell and Corrales.

Then you had this weekend, where Corrales would turn the tables on Casamayor. Do you

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sense a trend? Perhaps now Goossen will start getting some long overdue credit.

Y'know, this guy might have a future in this game. After all, he was able to teach an old dog, some new tricks.