

DeMarcus Corley: Sometimes Things Change

Written by Steve Argeris
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A little more than two years ago, DeMarcus Corley was defending his WBO 140-pound title in his hometown at the D.C. Armory, just a few subway stops away from his Kenilworth neighborhood. He beat up Randall Bailey for 12 rounds on Showtime, and then challenged everyone from Zab Judah to Kostya Tszyu.

And that was as good as it got, the high-water mark in a career that shows how remarkably quickly things can change. In the space of two years, Corley has gone from champion to opponent, same as Bailey before him. Now he's going to Puerto Rico to find out how good Miguel Cotto is, and it's up to Corley to either win back the belt or lose for the third time in his past four fights.

Corley has always been an afterthought at 140-pounds, even when he held the WBO belt. Lost among the Arturo Gattis and Kostya Tszyus, he complained for years about not getting the fights he wanted. Over the past 18 months, he's gotten them - and gotten beaten. Now he's got Cotto, listed as an 8-to-1 favorite by some, and another loss would all but bury his legitimacy for a pay-cable fight.

But while Corley's had difficulties with upper-tier talent over the past year, I don't see why Cotto's such a strong favorite. Corley clearly had problems with Mayweather and Judah's power shots, and earned a reputation for having a weak chin, but he's never been knocked out in 33 fights. Perhaps that's a credit to his elusiveness and defense more than his chin. But still, whatever Cotto's got, Corley's seen already.

He's the first lefthander that Cotto has faced as a professional, and he might be a bit quicker than the Puerto Rican. So if Corley's got a shot, I think it comes down to him rising to the occasion by keeping to a plan: a moving, counterpunching, disciplined approach.

Staying on plan has never been a hallmark of D.C. fighters, however, and that's why I don't get why Corley's putting himself in such a losing situation by fighting at super lightweight.

I can figure out why he's doing it - the money's presumably pretty good - but what I can't figure out is why is he still at 140-pounds? I covered Corley for two years in Washington, and he walked around at 145-pounds most of that time. He's already old enough at 30 to see he's not going up in weight class. Why not go down to 135? Juan Diaz, Jose Luis Castillo and Diego Corrales, who hold the belts in that division, seem a lot more attractive as any of the top 10 players at 140. His managers at the time talked of a two-fight deal with Floyd Mayweather in 2003, where Corley would go down to 135 and Mayweather would come up to 140. A novel idea, but Mayweather proved his worth by soundly beating Corley at 140 in May. Why not leave junior welter alone and go down to lightweight?

Throughout his career, Corley has rarely caught any breaks. He initially left boxing after a reasonably successful amateur career in his late teens for a few years of odd jobs and petty

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crime. He came back to boxing in his early 20s, dealt drugs until well into his professional career, fathered seven (and counting children), lost his brother to a drug-related shooting, and lost the biggest fights of his career. Along the way, he provided for more than 14 children (his own and his brother's), and developed an acrimonious relationship with many in the local boxing scene.

Washington boxing is a small and often acrimonious circle, with only Mark "Too Sharp" Johnson getting along with more or less everybody among the high-profile fighters in the region. William Joppy and Corley came to blows in a useless gym scrap, Corley and Sharmba Mitchell sniped at each other frequently, but Corley's reputation never matched either man.

He lingered for months at a time, waiting for a big fight, a crack at any of the big names in a division loaded with them. Why did he struggle to land a fight? He's an East Coast-based black fighter, left-handed and not particularly thrilling to watch. That's a recipe for a marketing nightmare, and Corley's flamboyant ring couture drew less attention than his admission that he wore women's underwear at times. His role in the Don King stable has become clear: he provided a credible opponent for the promoter's bigger names.

But despite upsetting Felix Flores in June 2001 - knocking him out on five days' notice for the WBO belt - he has rarely captured the moment since. He beat a pair of mediocre opponents in Ener Julio and Bailey and waited for a big-time fight.

After scrapping with Judah after the Bernard Hopkins-Morrade Hakkar fight, he landed the huge fight he wanted: Judah in July 2003. He lost the first round, looked good in the second, and then got outclassed more soundly than the split decision made it look. Corley ripped body shots, wobbled Judah a little bit, then went off plan. Corley fired his trainer, Bernard Roach, the guy who had helped him get the belt in the first place, and stayed in shape largely by entering training camp with others. He helped Tszyu get in shape for Sharmba Mitchell, a lucrative move that further alienated Corley from his D.C. compatriots.

Mayweather blew him out in May 2004. He has only a unanimous decision over a 44-year-old Daryl Tyson to his credit since beating Bailey in January 2003.

Now he's taking on a protected commodity on his home turf in Cotto. He's an opponent, same as Bailey before him. Cotto's best wins have come against Lovemore N'Dou and - you guessed it - Randall Bailey. Corley is better than both of them. He might be better than Cotto. It's up to him to prove it tonight.