

“Daddy, Daddy,” my three-year-old cheerfully exclaimed while he repeatedly hit me in the ribs to get my attention. It felt like he touched every nerve ending in my side as I jumped up out of my seat to get away from his pain-inducing taps. My left hand shot out with the speed of a Larry Holmes jab and grabbed his wrist. “Please don’t touch Daddy right now. He’s got some boobos that need to heal.”

The “boobos” were inflicted by one of the best boxers in the world, Kassim “The Dream” Ouma. I had been after him for months to spar with me, so that I could write about the experience of being in the ring with a top professional. He finally obliged. The beating was far worse than I expected.

Inspiration

“Come on, throw the right!”

“Circle to the left! What’s the matter with you?!”

“Get up! Get up, you bum. Get up!”

Everyone at ringside rolled their eyes whenever the skinny dude with the glasses and the baseball hat turned backwards (to cover his receding hairline) barked instructions and insults to one of the boxers. The rolled eyes turned to shaking heads, which led to clenched jaws. The fight doctor was the first one to snap. “You think you can do better?” he yelled at Skinny Dude. “Then you get up there in that ring.”

“Man, I’ll go in there and knock that mother out,” Skinny Dude answered while he threw punches in the air. Everyone in shouting distance dismissed him and returned to watching the action.

Boxing is very different than other sports. Most of us know that even if we ruled the playground, there is no way we could stop AI from going to the hole. If we were the fastest kid in school, we would be toast against Randy Moss. We all realize that, even by accident, we couldn’t touch a Randy Johnson fastball. But we’ve all been in fights. Most of us have won a few. And when watching boxing, we often picture ourselves in the ring, able to execute our strategies with surgical precision, because, after all, we kicked that kid’s ass in fourth grade with one punch.

Knowing that Skinny Dude was all talk and there was no way, under any circumstances, he would ever actually get in the ring, I decided to take a stand – for the boxers who don’t get the respect they deserve. I, an average Joe with mediocre athletic ability, would serve myself up on a platter to a world-class boxer, to prove to you (and Skinny Dude) that, no, you can’t kick his ass.

Weekend Warrior Challenges Kassim Ouma

Written by Marc Lichtenfeld
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I'm 37-years old, but by the pure luck of genetics, I look and sometimes feel years younger. I've also kept myself in halfway decent shape. Although I've followed boxing for a quarter of a century and have written about it professionally for seven years, I'd never stepped in the ring.

My opponent would be one of the best boxers in the world. Kassim Ouma, currently the IBF world champion at 154-pounds, was the number one rated contender when he agreed to fight me. He's 26-years old and sports a record of 21-1-1 with 13 knockouts. My man is always in shape and breaks records for most punches thrown in a round.

There was probably a boxer with less imposing credentials that would have proven my point. But I've known Kassim for a couple of years and his fighting weight and my "walking around" weight are about the same. Besides, everyone in the South Florida boxing circle talks about what a super nice guy he is.

Training Camp

Being an average Joe with a job, a wife, a kid, and another one on the way, I couldn't exactly take off eight weeks to retreat to a secluded camp in the Poconos. But I dedicated myself to working out and getting in the best shape of my life so that I could go three 3-minute rounds with Kassim.

I also had a secret weapon. I hired former world champion Johnny "Bump City" Bumphus to work with me on weekends. Johnny is Kassim's trainer.

On February 13, 2004, I showed up at the USA Training Center in West Palm Beach to begin "camp." While waiting for Johnny to arrive, I tried to walk off the nervous energy by pacing around the gym. I had taken white collar boxing classes at fancy-pants gyms before, so I had a basic foundation to work with, but now I was in a gritty, steamy gym right out of central casting, ready to work with a big-time trainer.

After pacing the floor for about a half-hour and placing two unanswered calls to Johnny, I gave up on him and hit the heavy bag by myself. Boxers are notorious for not being where they're supposed to be.

The following weekend, "camp" really does get underway. I learn some techniques that directly contradict my white collar boxing schooling. Johnny tells me to snap the jab all the way out, that my elbow needs to get used to it because I'm going to miss sometimes.

We work on the left hook. He's impressed that I have the correct shoulder movement down, but my punch is too short. He tells me they need to be wider. To get me to throw the hook correctly he instructs me to drop my hand and pretend I'm slapping someone upside the head. After I get that down we follow the hook with a straight right. When that doesn't go well he asks, "Ain't you never slapped somebody?" I reply, "Yeah, but I never followed it with a straight right."

After shadowboxing about five rounds, I do six more on the bag. In-between the fifth and sixth, I take a seat on a nearby stool. "No sitting until you're done," Bump City commands. Then we

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work with the mitts, where he has me slip and block while I throw combinations. Finally, sit ups and pushups.

On the way home, I feel worn out, but great. That night, I'm so exhausted I dream about how tired I am.

The next several weeks pretty much followed the same pattern. Sometimes Johnny would show up, sometimes he wouldn't. When he did, he always reinforced the basics – keep my left foot on the outside because Kassim is a southpaw, keep my hands up, bring my jab back quickly.

One Saturday in late March he asked me if I wanted to spar with him. For a boxing junkie like me, this was like one of those baseball fantasy camps where you get to play against former big leaguers. I was about to get in the ring with a former world champion, one that I grew up watching on TV.

I got my headgear on and put in my mouthpiece. Johnny had neither of those and didn't seem especially concerned. To hide my own jitters I asked him if he was nervous. He wasn't.

Although I didn't think he'd try to hurt me, I had no idea what to expect. The man across from me was, at one time, one of the best boxers in the world. Apparently, I didn't mask my nervousness too well. About thirty seconds into the session Johnny scolded me: "Take it easy. Relax. Breathe."

Bump City peppered me with jabs and slipped most of my punches with ease. In the third round, I was huffing and puffing. I had done ten rounds on the bag before but it doesn't compare to the intensity of being in there with a live opponent. Suddenly I caught him square with a right uppercut. He looked at me with a surprised expression on his face, his mouth forming an "O". Then he slid to my left, smiling.

All through training, I tried to nail down a date with Kassim. He always told me to call back later. In the meantime, I continued to hit the gym. I got my second sparring session in with a local amateur named Omar Brown. I was told to be very careful about getting in the ring with any of the boxers at the gym, because they "like to beat up on white boys."

But Omar and I had become friendly during my training and I was confident he'd be cool. For five rounds, he basically just worked on his defense. The only time he really took it to me was when I got tired and stopped throwing punches. Then he'd force me to fight him off, which was a good lesson.

I finally confirmed a date for my showdown with Kassim. It would be in one week, on April 24th, at the USA Training Center in West Palm Beach, where we both train. All week long I visualized the fight. How I would circle to my left, shoot the jab, and spin out of threatening situations.

Meanwhile, at home, my wife was nine months pregnant. We couldn't agree on whether she should attend the fight. She wanted to come and support me. However, hearing her gasp (and

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she would) when I took one in the grill wasn't my idea of a morale booster. Besides, I was afraid she'd drop the baby right there in the gym due to the stress of seeing me get hit and hit often.

On Wednesday, April 21, I got a call to rush home, my wife was in labor. The fight was off.

I believe I now understand what a huge letdown it must be for a boxer to train for a fight and have it cancelled, for whatever the reason. I had spent so much physical and mental energy in preparing myself, I thought it would be difficult to get up for this type of thing again.

As it turned out, Kassim had a similar situation in June. He was supposed to fight for the title, but was injured during the last week of training camp and had to pull out.

After Kassim healed, we rescheduled for August 4th. As I feared, I did have a tough time going back to training. I worked out, but it wasn't with the same intensity as I had earlier. I got in two more sparring sessions, including one with a 140 pound prospect named Edwin Algarin. Edwin is very fast and I couldn't catch him at all. He also put me on Queer Street for the first time. As he slid to my left he popped me with a right hook to the temple. Everything went fuzzy for about half a second. When it cleared and I realized my legs were still under me, I went back to work in my fruitless pursuit to land one of my own.

Despite giving him what had to be the worst sparring session in his career, Edwin complimented me on lasting three rounds. "Most guys come in here and think it's easy, but they couldn't do one round. You did good." Despite having a fulfilling life outside the ring, I must admit, that comment made my day.

In the weeks leading up to the fight, I saw Kassim at various boxing events around town. I'd make it a point to joke around with him about how I'm going to shock the world come August 4th. He usually answered with something about a funeral.

It's Go Time

Surprisingly, I slept fine the night before. The butterflies were fluttering, but I wasn't feel-like-I-have-to-puke-nervous. I got to the gym at 10:30 for our 11:00 showdown. After warming up and getting my hands wrapped, I wait. And wait. And wait. Kassim, of course, is nowhere to be found. Several people try to reach him. Finally, a little after noon, he strolls in and starts his funeral talk again.

There were other sparring sessions going on in the ring while we waited for our turn. I had it in my head that we'd climb through the ropes, I'd get some final instructions from Johnny, hear the bell, take a deep breath and go to work getting my ass kicked. However, because of the other sparring, we had to jump into the ring as the others exited and started from the moment we got in. There was no moment of, "Okay . . . here we go."

In the four sparring sessions I had in preparation for the exhibition, all of the guys kept their distance and counterpunched. I assumed Kassim Ouma, one of the best boxers in the world,

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would do the same.

I was wrong.

He took the fight to me at the opening bell. All I saw in front of me was a blur of blue gloves. Everything I learned went out the window as I merely tried to survive. I knew he was holding back on his power, but it seemed like his work rate was just as furious as ever.

After the first round, Johnny gave me some guidance on how to spin out of the inside fighting. I thought he was crazy if he believed I'd really be able to pull that off. I began to tire badly in the second round. Getting repeatedly punched in the face is much more exhausting than you'd think. I did have my moments. At one point, I landed a perfect one-two combination right down the pipe. A heavyweight that I had worked with in the gym shouted, "Yeah, do it again!" So I did and it was just as effective. My friend yelled for me to repeat the salvo. This time I figured Kassim would see it coming and would make me pay dearly. I circled to the left and threw an ineffective hook. Later in the round I caught him with a right uppercut when he had me against the ropes. However, it didn't give me the breathing room I desperately needed.

In the third round, my gas tank was on empty. I was getting pummeled around the ring and there was nothing I could do about it. The only respite would be to take a knee. As I was stuck against the ropes with Kassim raining punches down on me, I seriously thought about it. However, I had friends who were watching, and to be honest, as bad as I knew I would look in the photos, I didn't want there to be one of me on the canvas. I may be an awful boxer, but I'm a vain one.

What was surprising was that the punches didn't hurt. The blows were forceful enough to snap my head back or to send me crashing into the ropes, but I guess due to the adrenaline, there was no pain involved – yet. There was even one instance where he was catching me with rights to the ribs over and over again. I thought to myself, "This doesn't hurt. If I lower my arm to block it, my chin will be exposed and that could end things quick." So I let Kassim hammer my ribs until I was able to grab him in a clinch.

The last round had to be the longest three minutes in the history of recorded time (not including a John Ruiz fight). The buzzer telling me that I had thirty seconds left was the sweetest sound I ever heard, second only to the final buzzer.

I spit out my mouthpiece to allow more air to fill my lungs and had Johnny take off my headgear so I could cool off. People were patting me on the back, telling me that I "did it." But all I could focus on was not spilling my breakfast all over the ring. I walked over to Kassim to try to gasp out a thank you. He raised our hands with a big grin on his face. I felt like I might pass out.

Aftermath

By the time I got home, my nose was swollen and I had a black eye. The next day the ribs on my left side (where I thought stupidly to myself as Kassim was pounding them, "Hey, this doesn't hurt") had a big purple and green bruise. I couldn't sleep on that side for three nights.

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But more surprisingly, every muscle in my body hurt, not just the ones that had been in the way of Kassim's fists. It felt like I'd been in a nine-minute long car wreck.

Within a week, I was back to my pretty self and even returned to the gym on Saturday to work out. Although I performed worse than even I expected, there was a newfound respect accorded me, because as one of the boxers put it, "Now, you know."

I hope that Skinny Dude and all the others like him know now too.