

Joey Gilbert – Heart and Soul of “The Contender”

Written by Robert Mladinich
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Middleweight Joey Gilbert, who was generally considered the heart and soul of “The Contender” reality television series, says that, from a pugilistic standpoint, he literally grew up on the show. Of all the contestants he was not only the least experienced boxer, he is the most unlikely of boxers.

The 29-year-old Chicago native, who moved to Reno, Nevada, in high school, is a college graduate who also happens to be a licensed attorney. The son of a United States Marine Corps lieutenant commander who was serving in Afghanistan at the time of the show’s filming, Gilbert, a classic overachiever, never thought for a minute that he didn’t deserve to be there.

Regardless of what some other “contenders” are saying, the high-energy Gilbert insists that being part of the show was a very unique and positive experience. “It provided what a boxer needs most—exposure,” said Gilbert during a recent visit to New York where he took in Lou DiBella’s August 25 show at the Manhattan Center. “It also showed that many boxers are nice people with nice families.”

Moreover, while Gilbert admits that some dramatic licensing was taken with the editing, rumors that boxers were not presented as who they really are is nonsense. “That’s bull,” he said. “We are who we are and the camera doesn’t lie. As far as depicting our personalities, that was accurate.”

One thing that turned out to be not particularly accurate was the way Gilbert was depicted from the onset as not having a snowball’s chance in hell of winning any fights. Although he was a supremely gifted athlete—perhaps the best all-around athlete on the show—it was not until he out-pointed the much more experienced Jimmy Lange that people began to take notice. Going into the fight, Lange was 24-1-1 (17 KOs), while Gilbert was 9-0 (7 KOs).

By the time Gilbert lost a five round technical decision to Peter Manfredo Jr., who was 22-1 (10 KOs) going into the fight, eleven days later Gilbert was the hand’s down fan and viewer’s favorite.

“I don’t think there was a single person, except myself and my father, who thought I would go anywhere on the show,” said Gilbert, whose record now stands at 9-1 (7 KOs). “At the beginning (of filming) Sugar Ray Leonard told me I might have to go into the dark room and decide if I wanted to come out. Against Manfredo, I was hurting, but I kept thinking of a photo I had of my father fighting for his country in Afghanistan, sitting in a tent in 130 degree weather. I said, ‘Hell no, I’m not quitting.’”

Even though Manfredo cracked three of his ribs, Gilbert still felt like a winner. “With very little experience I was put in against Manfredo, who I had been watching on Friday Night Fights for years,” said Gilbert. “While these guys were gathering professional experience, I was in the law library studying for the Bar exam (which he passed on the third try). They (the Nevada legal

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community) don't work the Bar exam around my schedule.

“I always knew I had the balls and the chin, and that I just needed the experience to compete on that next level,” he added. “I was determined to prove that college kids can fight.”

Gilbert, a former intercollegiate champion for the University of Reno, proved that properly trained college kids – and lawyers – can fight. He also proved a whole lot more. Although he was one of the only unmarried contenders, the familial relationship he shared with his parents, Lt. Cmdr. Warren Gilbert and Debbie, was just as heartwarming as the other boxers' relationships with their wives and children.

However, while Gilbert says his father wholeheartedly supports his current choice of vocations, he unequivocally states that his mother detests it. But he has too much invested in boxing to not see it through.

He recently signed a promotional deal with Gary Shaw and is expected to fight under his banner on the undercard of the November 5 showdown between super middleweight titlists Jeff Lacy and Joe Calzaghe in Wales. Even while training for that bout, he has other irons on the fire.

Less than a week after his New York visit, where Gilbert also gave television journalist Geraldo Rivera a boxing lesson at a downtown Manhattan gym, Gilbert was scheduled to depart for Afghanistan as an official spokesperson for Bands of Freedom, which is part of a Stars and Stripes tour that helps military families in crisis. He is more than proud to not only be an American patriot, but also an emissary for the television show that, its dismal ratings notwithstanding, made him into more of a mainstream celebrity than any of his fellow contenders.

“Life is about making adjustments and boxing is about making adjustments,” said Gilbert. “I have no regrets whatsoever about going on the show. If anything, I would have liked to get the fights I needed before the show. But the way I see it, the best is yet to come.”

Stay tuned!