

Family Ties That Bind

Written by Bill Knight

Tuesday, 18 October 2005 19:00

Following in the family footsteps can be a tricky — sometimes even treacherous — business.

It can be an even more dangerous trek when the business is boxing. But the trip is made all the time. The Sweet Science seems to get into a family's bloodstream, working its way into hearts and souls and DNA and spreading like a plague ... a love affair of a plague.

Two men making that trip shared the same stage Saturday night, going center ring in El Paso, Texas, working in front of a small gathering at Speaking Rock Casino. Francisco Arce's older brother Jorge just fought in Las Vegas, just claimed that interim WBC flyweight title. Josh Cobb's father Randall "Tex" Cobb was one of the sport's more colorful characters; the man who fought Larry Holmes for a world title.

There are all sorts of differences between the younger Arce and the younger Cobb. The most noticeable is in pounds — Arce at around 113, Cobb at around 241. But there are other, more important differences. And there are so many similarities ... similarities like finding the sport on their own, similarities like angry mothers.

They are the same. Yet they are so different. Two young men. Two stories. Somehow linked by footsteps.

THE LITTLE MAN

Francisco and Jorge are close, very close. They train together, spar together. Francisco, 24, is ringside for big brother's biggest battles.

But Francisco Arce, a free-spirited and quick-witted sort, found boxing all on his own.

Grinning, laughing, Arce said, "As a boy I grew up something of a ruffian. When I was 15 I began to try this boxing thing. I had problems in school and just wasn't interested. My mother was mad. She wanted to know what I was going to do. I told her boxing. She was very angry. She told me to do it, to see if it was true. So I went to the mountains in Taluca and Erik Morales' dad took me under his wing.

"But I could feel it in my heart," he said, his expressive face telling a story all its own. "I was fascinated by the sport. It is my passion. I don't mind getting tagged. I don't mind getting hit. The only thing I don't like is stepping onto the scale. That is a discipline unto itself."

He still remembers that first moment in the ring, that night of March 23, 2001. He was facing Trinidad Ruiz in Tijuana.

"I was anxious," he said. "Most of all I wanted to destroy. And it was over in two rounds. I hit him and he fell and the referee stepped in and started the count."

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Francisco Arce is 15-2-2 now, trying to work through those same footsteps Jorge took to the top.

“Every day we train and spar,” he said. “We are so close. My brother is very strong. He hits hard. And he is fast. Very fast. I’ve sparred with other weight classes, but none of them hit as hard as my brother.”

Pausing, breaking into another grin, Francisco Arce said, “One time I bloodied his nose. I stepped back and said, ‘oh, [bleep].’ He just said no, no, no, don’t back off. He has always encouraged me to hit hard, to make it an instinct, to make it a part of me. Sometimes we get in there and really rumble. The public watching thinks we don’t look like brothers.”

Yet another brother, Milton, laughed and said, “I have to step in and break it up.”

Francisco grinned broadly again and said, “But my brother and I are so close. When my brother is in the spotlight, I’m always in his corner. I will notice things during the fight and tell him.”

On Saturday night in El Paso, Francisco Arce proved he was telling the truth. The young man does not mind getting tagged. He seems to almost relish it, coming to life and wading in for more and more, fighting harder and harder. It was also obvious he had been training hard. He was going stronger when the 10th round was vanishing than he was when the first round was drawing to a close.

But it was simply one of those strange nights in the profession for Arce.

Alejandro Moreno, from just across the border in Juarez, was game and experienced and fought well. But Arce seemed in control throughout. Judge Mark Ortega saw it that way, giving him the nod 97-93. But another judge saw it 96-94 for Moreno. And the third judge saw it even, 95-95. A draw.

“Unbelievable,” Arce said after the fight. “The judge who had it 97-93 ... he had it right. I don’t know what the other judge was looking at; maybe the ring girls. I did what I needed to do to win the fight.”

THE BIG MAN

Josh Cobb grew up in El Paso, playing football. At 6-foot-5, 240-to-250-pounds, he is an impressive specimen. But, unlike Arce and his older brother, Cobb was never close to his famous father.

He attended Temple University on a football scholarship. Then he came to boxing on his own terms. But he did bring his father’s humor.

“It was a number of things,” the 19-year-old Cobb said. “I was coming off an injury. I wasn’t happy with the way football or school was going. I thought about it for a month. I had football. But boxing seemed like a better opportunity. And I didn’t have to go to class.”

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Then an old family friend entered the picture. Ron Weathers, who managed Tex Cobb, approached Josh's mother. Enter another mad mom. Weathers asked her if he could get Josh involved in boxing. Her response? She would kill Weathers and burn his house down. But she passed along the opportunity to her son anyway. And a career was born.

Josh Cobb had no amateur career. He trained in Las Vegas. Still does. He had his first fight — amateur or professional — last April against Ken Guthrie. Cobb knocked him out in 57 seconds. But then came a speed bump in his career.

Cobb faced Javier Diaz later that month on ESPN and was stopped, a third round TKO ... 1:42 of the third round. He looked terrible. His stamina was questioned. Everything was questioned.

"I wasn't nervous in any way or form," he said. "I put my work in and I felt it was my time to be in the spotlight. But I had a very serious lung condition. Actually, I had a collapsed lung ... that had nothing to do with boxing. But I'm healthy now and I'm ready to keep learning."

Enter the Cobb wit.

"Apparently, when you run and train and don't party, that's how you get results," he said, only half joking.

He said he was excited about fighting in his home town: "All my friends are back in town for a wedding. They'll be there to cheer me on or pretend they don't know me, depending on how it goes."

Cobb paused, shrugged and said, "I'm learning something every day. If you're not learning something, you're not doing it right. It's a constant learning experience."

Grinning again, getting a bit of mischief in his eyes, he added, "We're taking baby steps in the gym. We don't put whiskey in the water bottles anymore. I feel I need to get down to around 230. I've dropped 25 pounds in the past two months. Go figure. I guess if you go run, don't eat so much and don't drink beer, you can lose weight."

The day before his Saturday night rumble with 237-pound Jorge Luis Garcia, someone asked Cobb about the fight.

"You mean I have a fight tomorrow night? Man, I knew I should have trained."

But Josh Cobb was back in the knockout business Saturday night. He put Garcia to the canvas once early in the fight, then flattened him for good at 55 seconds. A nice, short night at the office.

Josh Cobb and his father talk. But they have never been close.

Son said dad wrote him a letter, told him to watch himself, that the business could be "shady," that it can "chew you up and spit you out."

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The two young men battle on, almost inevitably embracing a sport that is entrenched in their hearts, their souls and probably their DNA. They say they have come to it on their own, of their own free will. In their own ways, they have.

But those big footprints are out there, ever so tempting. Forever tempting.

It is an interesting path. Sometimes tricky. Sometimes treacherous. Sometimes wonderful. Always alluring.