

Demeanor and Jean-Marc Mormeck

Written by Robert Mladinich
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As WBC/WBA cruiserweight champion Jean-Marc Mormeck of France addressed the assembled media at the Church Street Gym in downtown Manhattan, it was hard to imagine that he was a fighter of such international renown.

He was preparing for his January 7 unification bout against IBF titlist O'Neill "Supernova" Bell of Atlanta at Madison Square Garden. The fight will be televised on the Judah-Baldomir undercard Saturday night on Showtime.

There is not a nick or a scar on his broad, friendly face. His unique bleached sideburns and goatee make him look more scholarly than athletic. And when he speaks, his demeanor is more like a Zen master or yoga instructor than the ferocious power puncher that he is.

But don't get lured in by Mormeck's façade. As his 31-2 (21 KOs) record will attest, he is a fighter through and through.

If you have any doubts, just ask former champion Wayne Braithwaite, whom he beat by 12 round decision in his last fight in April, former champion Virgil Hill, whom he has beaten twice, once by TKO, or Dale Brown and Alexander Gurov, both of whom he stopped while making successful title defenses.

Or you can just ask the hard-punching, fast-talking, extremely intense Bell, whose record going into Saturday's fight is 25-1-1 (23 KOs).

"He's the bull, but I'm the matador," said Bell. "I have a lot of respect for him. He is a real warrior who comes to fight. He wouldn't be where he is today if he didn't deserve to be a champion. I know he wants to fight. But I want it more. It will be a war of attrition that I will win."

Not so, says the soft-spoken Mormeck, whose feathers seem hard to ruffle.

"I do not care what he is saying," Mormeck said through an interpreter. "I didn't come to the United States to lose. He talks a lot about blood, but I don't like blood. I only love to win."

Although Bell talked a good game, he seemed much more tightly wound than Mormeck. Moreover, although Bell is a supremely gifted boxer/puncher, he is known for fighting a lot more dangerously than he has to.

That was obvious when he won the vacant title in a bout against Dale Brown earlier this year. Most observers thought that Brown easily deserved the decision.

That opinion was only exacerbated when Bell had a tougher time than expected against South Africa strongman Sebastian Rothman in his first defense. He wound up stopping Rothman with one punch in the 11th round of a fight he was losing.

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"I'm diverse," said Bell. "I can adapt to whatever situation arises. I can back [Mormeck] up or I can go toe-to-toe with him. If I need to, I can score a devastating knockout. Whatever the fight calls for me to do to win, I will do. "

Devastating knockouts seem to be Bell's forte, but that might not happen against the thick-trunked, extremely strong and resilient Frenchman.

Most people expected Braithwaite to beat Mormeck, but Mormeck rolled over Braithwaite with ease. In that bout, Braithwaite, whose nickname is "Big Truck," seemed more like the road than the truck as Mormeck steamrolled him.

"I was surprised by his strength," said Braithwaite, now 21-1 (17 KOs). "He was much stronger than I expected."

By beating Braithwaite, Mormeck, who already held the WBA crown, added the WBC title to his collection. He also moved one step closer to becoming the first undisputed cruiserweight champion since Evander Holyfield reigned supreme nearly two decades ago.

"I have great respect for Holyfield's career, for the warrior, the man, for everything he has done," said Mormeck. "It would be a great honor and something magic to do what Holyfield did."

Like Holyfield, Mormeck has discussed the possibility of moving up to the heavyweight division in the not too distant future. He has publicly stated that he would most like to fight WBO champion Lamon Brewster because he is so strong.

However, in the days leading up to the Bell fight, he only had Supernova on his mind.

"Since I was a kid back in France, America has always been a dream," Mormeck said. "Today I have a chance to fight at Madison Square Garden. It is a dream come true for me. That is all I am focused on. Right now, I think of Bell.

"After I beat him, I think of other things."