

Kendall Gill, from Hardwood to Canvas

Written by Jesse K. Cox

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Kendall Gill had two reasons for becoming a boxer at the age of 37. Neither of them involved fighting for a championship belt.

“The reason why I decided to box was to go back and play (in the NBA),” he said. “So I can get the body I had when I was 19. It’s part of the reason why I did it, along with me wanting to achieve a childhood dream (of boxing professionally).”

For the Chicago native, his days in the ring and on the hardwood are limited, but more so in the squared circle.

Yes, it’s unbelievable how I just shoehorned two slabs of jargon from two different sports so close together. It’s even more amazing that Gill has found success in his 3-0 start in the boxing world when so many other crossover athletes have failed; but crossing two sports may not seem like so much of a stretch anymore considering that fistic outbreaks are becoming almost as commonplace in the professional basketball ranks as they are in boxing.

The only difference – no matter what the New York Knicks’ Stephon Marbury may think – is that boxing demands so much more. Gill, whose name is attached to college basketball’s “Flying Illini” and various NBA franchises, admitted as much.

“I know I’m better than I’ve ever been, which would have put me in the best in the league,” said Gill, who’s trained for two years at JABB, a gym on Chicago’s west side near his old NBA home at the United Center. “When I see these guys on TV, they’re out of shape, they’re getting hurt. It really upsets me.”

For some reason, the NBA doesn’t want to give Gill a chance. It’s likely age discrimination from a league riding a flashy campaign based around its youthful players. LeBron James, Carmelo Anthony and Kobe Bryant are the faces of the NBA that would have Michael Jordan limping on a cane and asking when “Matlock” was supposed to come on television.

Gill sought a new lease on his NBA life through boxing and followed the program precisely. He ran five miles every morning – which very few, if any, pro basketball players can truthfully attest to doing on a daily basis. He endured a rigorous two-hour basketball program at 8 a.m. before wrapping his hands for even more punishment at JABB that afternoon.

And the best reaction he could get?

“The Dallas Mavericks came in and worked me out and said, ‘Man, you look like you’re 26 years old,’” Gill said. “So I said, ‘Sign me.’”

“But they just think I’m old ... I feel like Clubber Lang not getting a championship shot.”

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Championship shots are far from anything Gill wanted out of the fight game and the cruiserweight division in which he's still undefeated. But he's watched the rise of former Russian basketball player Nikolay Valuev.

"His size is overwhelming," he said. "It's hard to hit the guy in the face."

At 6-foot-5, Gill is among the taller cruiserweights. He said his height doesn't allow him to truly put his legs behind punches, although he's earned two first-round technical knockouts in three fights.

He doesn't see Valuev's height as too much of an advantage for the 7-foot giant to last long as the WBA heavyweight champion.

"He's just bigger than you," Gill said. "What I saw in the Ruiz fight, I think [Ruiz] got the shaft a little bit. I'm not saying he's not tough, but I don't think he has the talent of a real champion."

For all the success Gill has enjoyed as a boxer, no fighter had caught him until Quenton Mitchell slammed a close shot to Gill's head in a November fight in Charlotte, N.C. The sensation has been described colorfully, or in painfully blunt fashion. Such a state is enough to deter some young fighters from ever pursuing a lengthy career in the fistic art.

"For me, it's the worst feeling in the world," trainer Freddie Roach said. "I got clipped by Mike (Tyson) one day and everything started to get dark. Before it went completely black, I came back."

To Gill's credit, he didn't go down, but the disoriented moment may have been the most sobering of his career.

"I can feel what could happen to you if you continue to stay in there," Gill said. "It just feels like your equilibrium is thrown off. Have you ever turned around really fast and tried to run? It's like that."

"I think boxing is only worth it to go long term if you're making millions and millions of dollars – something that is not happening with me."

Gill intends to give the NBA until April before taking on what could be his final fight. He hadn't intended to stay in beyond four bouts. But he hopes to make the last one count for more than just his farewell.

"I really want to go out there and show my skill level and technique," he said. "I want to be satisfied with what I did, but I'm satisfied right now."