

Freddie Roach takes center stage

Written by Ed Schuyler
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Freddie Roach wishes that as a fighter he had listened to Eddie Futch as closely as he did when he became an assistant to the late legendary trainer.

Roach recalled that after being stopped by Greg Haugen in the seventh round of a lightweight fight in 1985, "Eddie wanted me to retire, and I didn't want to. So I had five more fights and lost four of them."

He cannot be sure, but Roach believes those last five fights are at the root of his punch-induced Parkinson's Disease.

It is a belief that has led Roach to stop training Wayne McCullough, a former WBC bantamweight champion, who Roach believes is taking too many punches. McCullough wants to continue fighting.

After retiring in 1986, Roach worked as a busboy and in telemarketing before joining Futch as an unpaid assistant.

Roach listened and learned, and today he is one of the best trainers in boxing. He currently trains 10 fighters, including James Toney, who will challenge Hasim Rahman for the WBC heavyweight title on Saturday; junior welterweight Manny Pacquiao, the national treasure of the Philippines; WBC super bantamweight champion Israel Vasquez, and WBC light flyweight champion Brian Viloria.

"I was fortunate to be in the right place at the right time," Roach said.

Twenty years ago boxing seemed to have been the wrong place for him. "As a fighter I put a lot into it, but I didn't get much out of it," said Roach, who turned pro after a busy amateur career and posted a 39-13-0 record, with 15 knockouts, from 1978 to 1986.

The 46-year-old Roach, born at Dedham, Mass., comes from a boxing family. Father Paul posted a 22-3-0 record, with seven knockouts, in 1948-50 and was New England featherweight champion. Older brother Dominic and younger brother Joey had brief pro careers. Joey, a bantamweight, was 8-3-3, three knockouts, in 1982-86. Dominic, a featherweight known as Pepper, was 7-2-1, one knockout, in 1982-84. Another older brother, Al, also boxed.

Paul Roach got into the business of cutting down and trimming trees. While Freddie was learning the tree business from his father, he also was being schooled in boxing. He put on gloves for the first time at age 6.

"My father trained me as an amateur," Roach said. "I had 150 amateur fights, then I turned pro and went 4-0. My father turned me over to Eddie."

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Fighting out of, and mostly in, Las Vegas, Roach was a crowd-pleaser. "I had a good chin," he said. "I cut a lot. The fans liked it."

Roach, however, never challenged for a world title. He did duplicate his father's achievement, returning to Massachusetts in 1981 to score a 10-round decision over Joe Phillips for the New England featherweight title, which he never defended. The fight was a preliminary to Marvelous Marvin Hagler's eighth-round technical knockout of Fulgenico Obelmejias in a middleweight title defense in the Boston Garden.

Roach's final fight also was close to his birthplace. On Oct. 24, 1986, he lost a 10-round majority decision to David Rivello (9-0-0) at Lowell, Mass.

"I was 26 when I had my last pro fight," Roach said. "I did not really try to win. I was embarrassed. So I decided to quit." That decision severed the relationship with his father.

Returning to Las Vegas, Roach bused tables, dabbled in telemarketing and drank heavily, putting on 40 pounds. Life seemed aimless. Then he hooked up with former manager-trainer, and the sport that he felt had shortchanged him restored purpose to his life.

"I was Eddie's assistant for five years,," he said. "I remember Eddie gave me a little more responsibility each fight."

On one occasion, Roach recalled, "Eddie was busy training Larry Holmes for the second Michael Spinks fight, and Virgil Hill asked me to help him."

On another occasion, however, helping a fighter soured for a time Roach's relationship with Futch. Futch was training WBC welterweight champion Marlon Starling, with whom he had a bumpy relationship. Futch once told Starling, "Marlon, I've taught you all you know, but I haven't taught you all I know."

"Eddie and Marlon had a disagreement two weeks before a title fight, and Eddie left," Roach said. "I didn't think that was right so I stayed with Marlon for the fight (a 12-round decision of Chung Yung-Kil in 1989). "But we remained friends. I called Eddie for advice some times. Eddie was a great role model. As a trainer I copy Eddie's style and I have a calm corner. I feel people don't respond too well to shouting."

The corner is supposed to be a port in a storm for a fighter, where he can have hurts attended to and get advice and encouragement. Too many corners have too many voices and sound like a Saturday night part in a kitchen.

On Saturday night, Roach can become the trainer of a heavyweight champion if Toney beats Hasim Rahman for the WBC title.

He has worked with a former heavyweight champion, training Mike Tyson for his first-round knockout of Clifford Etienne in 2003 and his fourth-round KO loss to Danny Williams in 2004.

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“I had fun training Mike,” Roach said. “Mike is a likeable guy. Mike was always respectful to me. Mike liked me. He had seen me fight.”

Maybe if Freddie Roach had trained Mike Tyson sooner