

Francesco Pianeta: Heavyweight Prospect

Written by Luca De Franco
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Sauerland Event knows how to turn a fighter into a world champion on the five continents; just look at Nicolay Valuev. If Sauerland Event decides to invest in a boxer, it's best to keep an eye on him. That's why I called media director Heiko Mallwitz asking him for the phone number of heavyweight Francesco Pianeta.

Born in Italy and resident in Gelsenkirchen (Germany), Francesco fought in both countries building a record of 5-0, with 4 victories coming by way of knockout. His first bout took place on July 2, 2005, so he has just 14 months of experience as a professional. What makes Francesco Pianeta special? Many things. First of all, he is skilled enough to have Manfred Wolke as his trainer. As an amateur, Wolke won the gold medal at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City in the 147 lbs. division. Today, Wolke is one of the most respected trainers in the business. If Sauerland Event put Wolke in the Italian's corner, it means that they want Francesco to learn from the best and not to make any mistakes.

Another reason for following Pianeta's career is that Germany is the hottest boxing market in Europe: the purses are bigger than in almost any other country, large arenas regularly draw more than 10,000 fans and the shows are seen by millions of people all over the Europe. Even many American champions would welcome the opportunity to fight in Berlin. If Francesco becomes a star in Germany, he will get exposure everywhere. Italian sports newspapers already wrote many articles about him. That's logical since the only good heavyweight we have is Paolo Vidoz and a second competitive fighter would help greatly the popularity of boxing in Italy.

The third reason to consider Francesco special is that he has everything to appeal the American market. How many heavyweights get headlines and draw large crowds in the East Coast only because they have Italian blood? Pianeta was born in Italy and can fight. He is also handsome enough to become popular with the ladies, the ones who buy the tickets to see Oscar De La Hoya even if they don't know anything about boxing. When Pianeta's record will be 15-0, don't be surprised to see him at Madison Square Garden. It could happen, considering Sauerland Event's major connections in the United States.

Now, let's ask Francesco Pianeta about his career.

Francesco, how did you get in touch with Sauerland Event?

I was training in Gelsenkirchen, when a man noticed me and thought that I was skilled. He called Sauerland Event's Sports Director Mr. Hagen Doering and I got the opportunity to go to Berlin and show him what I could do. Mr. Doering reimbursed me the train ticket and paid me the hotel for two weeks. I trained at the gym located next to the famed Olympiastadion. Mr. Doering came to see me in action every day and he offered me a contract with Sauerland Event. I accepted with enthusiasm.

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Are you satisfied with your career thus far?

Yes, I am. Sauerland Event gave me Manfred Wolke as trainer and I can only improve under his direction. He keeps telling me to calm down when I get into the ring. My intention is always to launch as many consecutive punches as I can, but he says that it is more useful doing the right move at the right time. He wants me to keep at distance from my opponent, hit him in the right spots, create an opening and then score the KO. I got the opportunity to spar with some more experienced boxers like Timo Hoffman, Cenzig Koc, Henry Akinwande and 2004 Olympic super heavyweight champion Alexander Povetkin (who is 8-0 as a professional). Once, I also sparred with Nicolay Valuev. Right now, my training schedule is made of two daily sessions: two hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon, for six days a week.

Who was your idol growing up?

George Foreman. I saw his greatest fights on tape. I was greatly impressed by Foreman's destruction of Joe Frazier. It was unbelievable! The champion of the world, the man who knocked down and defeated Muhammad Ali, beaten up like a heavy bag. Right now, my idol is Paolo Vidoz. I consider him a great fighter. His recent loss to Vladimir Virchis (KO 6) happened because of a lucky punch. I don't think that Virchis could win the rematch.

Did watching the legends make you want to become a boxer?

Not really, my first love was muay thai. I competed in 10 bouts, building a record of 9-1. I fought in Germany, Holland and Switzerland. The rules allowed punches, kicks, sweeps and knees. Hitting with the elbows was illegal. My only loss happened in Gelsenkirchen, right in front of my hometown fans. It still drives me crazy, I know that I won. In Germany, muay thai draws an average of 2,000 people and the professional fighters who win major titles can get paid up to 5,000 Euros (\$ 6,500). Nobody has major sponsors. I realized that I had to switch to boxing to make it big.

What's your immediate goal?

I would like to become Italian heavyweight champion. My parents are from Corigliano, in the Calabria region. I was born in Cosenza on October 8, 1984 and lived there for the first six years of my life. In 1990, my father brought us to Germany where he worked in a butcher store. I always kept close ties with Italy and would consider a big honor winning the Italian title. That's why I was happy when Mr. Doering told me that I would fight in Rome. It happened last May 20, the ring was put in Piazza di Siena and there were at least 10,000 people (Note: the show was free of charge). I will fight again in Rome next October 13.

If you become Italian champion, the next step should be the European title.

I hope so, but I don't take these decisions. I trust Mr. Doering, I will do what he advises me to do.

Would you like to fight in the United States?

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I never considered it as an option. My priority is to make it big in Italy and Germany. There a lot of worthy opponents in Europe, there are major television networks who can give popularity to a fighter and there are sponsors. I can make money staying here.