

Pawal Wolak: Living the American Dream

Written by Robert Mladinich
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By any standard 25-year-old Pawal Wolak is living the American Dream. Along with his parents, he immigrated to the United States from his native Poland when he was in the fourth grade.

Although he didn't speak a word of English upon his arrival, he picked up the new language within a few months. Attending high school in suburban Arlington, New Jersey, he excelled in academics and sports.

He developed a passion for wrestling and weightlifting and even took up kickboxing. He went on to earn a bachelor's degree in business from Berkeley College in Manhattan. Like so many other college graduates, he moved to Brooklyn to pursue his career goals.

Surprisingly those goals had nothing to do with business, although Wolak will revisit those ambitions later. Right now he is an undefeated middleweight boxer with a 10-0 (6 KOS) record who is all action all the time.

On October 19, at the Plattduetsche Park restaurant in Franklin Square, Long Island, he will be fighting his very first main event. His opponent is Jose Felix, a decent journeyman with a 10-4-2 (3 KOS) record who hails from Savannah, Georgia.

Wolak trains too hard to be worried about his opponent. More than anything else, he is excited about who he will be sharing the spotlight with that night.

Promoters Bob Duffy and Tony Mazarrella's Ring Promotions are hosting a grand night of boxing, as well as a tribute to legendary referee Arthur Mercante Sr., who resides a few miles down the road in Garden City. The evening promises to have something for everyone.

"Whenever I think of Arthur Mercante, I think of all the great championship fights," said Wolak, alluding to the fact that the 86-year-old Mercante, who was a referee from 1954 until 2001, has been the third man in the ring for scores of champions.

Besides officiating what is still generally regarded as the Fight of the Century – Muhammad Ali-Joe Frazier I at Madison Square Garden in 1971 – he has worked with, among others, Floyd Patterson, Emile Griffith, Carlos Ortiz, George Foreman, Sugar Ray Leonard, Wilfred Benitez, Jeff Fenech, Mike Tyson, Julio Cesar Chavez, Ike Quartey, Roy Jones Jr., Shane Mosley, and Ricardo Lopez.

"Having him honored at one of my matches gives my fight even more status," continued Wolak, who speaks perfect English with nary a trace of an accent. "It gives me even more incentive to look good."

"Arthur is an American legend of international renown," added Duffy. "To be able to honor him so close to his home is actually an honor for Tony and me. This was a long time coming, and I

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am glad we are going to make it happen.”

Other scheduled fights will feature such New York area favorites as female featherweight Jaime McGrath from Long Island’s East End, junior middleweight Jason Thompson, 3-1 (2 KOS), cruiserweight Mazur Scott, 1-0, light heavyweights Joel Castillo and Denys Lozado in separate bouts, and junior featherweight Juan Dominguez.

Also appearing on the card is female super middleweight Asa Sandell, a native of Sweden who now lives in New York and was very impressive in a losing effort to Laila Ali last December in Berlin.

In addition, fans will not only be able to purchase copies of Mercante’s recently published autobiography, “Inside the Ropes,” he will be happy to autograph them.

The book offers an unflinchingly honest account of his life in boxing, including his feud with Rocky Marciano, his dislike of Howard Cosell, and how a mistake on his part almost turned the Fight of the Century into the Controversy of the Century.

And then there is Wolak, who is a great story unto himself. He is up at 4:30 every morning for his daily roadwork over and around the Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridges. Then it is off to his nine-to-five job, where he is an assistant manager at Channel Jewelry Creations in Manhattan’s Diamond District.

After work he treks back to Brooklyn, to Gleason’s Gym, where he regularly throws 1,200 punches per training session. He often doesn’t arrive home until 9:00 P.M.

“I work a lot of hours and I have a lot of responsibility, but I am very disciplined so I have a good rhythm,” he explained. “I’ve been doing it for so long, it doesn’t even seem like work to me.”

He has sparred with the likes of Zab Judah and Chris “The Mechanic” Smith, and says that he will work with whoever is available because he leaves every sparring session with at least one lesson learned.

It seems that whatever pursuits Wolak has embarked, he has done full throttle. Although he looks slim and streamlined, he was able to squat 600 pounds in high school. He originally hoped to get into Ultimate Fighting, so he visited the Dover Boxing Gym, which was near his home in New Jersey.

“I just wanted to learn striking,” said Wolak. “I was already a good wrestler and thought I would do well in the UFC. But I couldn’t find any good gyms for that because the sport wasn’t popular yet. Once I started boxing, I was very drawn to it.”

Wolak amassed a 40-5 amateur record before turning pro in July 2004. Fighting throughout the New York metropolitan area, his busy schedule resulted in him building a constantly increasing fan base.

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His favorite active fighter is Kassim Ouma, a native of Uganda who now lives in Florida and will challenge middleweight champion Jermain Taylor in December. Wolak is one of the few boxing insiders who gives Ouma a chance of winning.

“If he comes prepared, which I know he will, he can overwhelm Taylor,” he explained.

He also believes that middleweight John Duddy, who he calls a “very nice guy,” can provide the shot in the arm that boxing needs right now.

“A lot of people look at boxers as bad guys,” said Wolak. “Most of us work too hard to get into trouble. Duddy can help people look at boxers a little better.”

Wolak is much too humble to realize it, but he too has the ability to be a goodwill ambassador to the sport.

Only in America could the grandson of Polish farmers and the son of a carpenter not only adapt to a new culture in such a short time, but also dream big and then watch as all of his hard work and dedication bring even his loftiest dreams to fruition.

“I’m a very determined person,” said Wolak. “Whatever I put my mind to, I work hard to make happen. I always considered myself a tough guy, even before I started wrestling or boxing. You don’t have to be a fighter to be tough.”

The Plattduetsche Park restaurant is located at 1132 Hempstead Turnpike in Franklin Square, Long Island, which is approximately one mile east of Belmont Racetrack. Tickets can be purchased there or by calling the restaurant at 516-354-3131. You can also purchase tickets by calling Frankie G’s Academy of Boxing in Huntington Station at 631-673-3520 or by telephoning Bob Duffy at 516-313-2304.

Limited reserved ringside seating is \$75. General admission is \$50 and VIP tables that can accommodate 10 people are available for \$1,500. VIP tables include dinner, unlimited beverages and an autographed copy of Mercante’s book.