

## Upheaval, Reunion In Cory Spinks' Corner

Written by Ron Borges  
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Timing is everything in life and at least that important inside a boxing ring.

This is particularly true for a fighter like Cory Spinks, who has become a two-time world champion by his wits, his quickness and his often baffling boxing style rather than from the threat of fearsome punching power. That only makes his decision to dump long-time trainer and confidante Kevin Cunningham three weeks before Thursday night's IBF light middleweight title fight in St. Louis all the more baffling.

Change is the one constant in boxing but changing the makeup of your corner less than a month before facing the challenge of a veteran warrior and former world champion like Verno Phillips is hardly a recommended way to prepare yourself to fight.

Yet mystery and palace intrigue are often the most fascinating parts of the makeup of a fighter and the 30-year-old Spinks has certainly added markedly to his own by replacing the man who raised him in boxing with the one who didn't raise him at all, his mostly absent father Leon.

Although the former heavyweight champion has not taken over his son's daily preparation, he and his uncle, the former light heavyweight and heavyweight champion Michael Spinks, will both assist long-time St. Louis gym veteran and amateur trainer Buddy Shaw in a corner once dominated solely by Cunningham's voice. Whether that triumvirate will help young Spinks defend the portion of the 154-pound title he now holds after losing the unified welterweight championship to Zab Judah two years ago and dropping a middleweight title challenge to then champion Jermain Taylor in his last outing 10 months ago is another matter and a highly problematic one.

Yet the champion, now managed by his new wife Christy, believes the upheaval around him is meaningless because, well, only one guy does the fighting in the end.

"We just had our disagreements and went our separate ways," Spinks (36-4, 11 KO) said Monday night from a hotel in St. Louis when asked about his decision to replace Cunningham. "Egos got in the way. It had been building up. We accomplished a lot but it's time for something new.

"I take my hat off to the guy for what he did for me but I gotta move on. It was a hard decision but some you just have to make. I'm sorry it didn't work out but you can't stay stuck in that frame of mind. Things aren't going to change. I have a job to do. That's where my head is at. Not on shifting trainers. We still plan on shining."

Whether the sound of so many voices in a corner where for so long only one was heard will result in a smooth outing remains to be seen, although Spinks pointed out he was trained for many years by the man who started him in boxing, Charles Hamm, until Hamm's retirement. Yet for much of that time Hamm and Spinks worked in Cunningham's gym, which was in the

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basement of a former police building Cunningham took over while still a St. Louis cop trying to turn around the lives of young St. Louis street urchins through the discipline of boxing.

Cunningham is gone now, although still not far away as he continues to train Spinks' former stablemate, fast-rising prospect Devon Alexander, who will fight on the undercard. Some boxing insiders believe people around Spinks had begun to grow jealous of Alexander because of the time and attention Cunningham was devoting to him and the fact that promoter Don King sees him as one of his best prospects and the brightest part of his company's future at the moment. Regardless of the reasons behind his dismissal, Cunningham took the high road in an often low sport Monday afternoon when asked about the sudden shift away from him.

"It just got to the point where Cory's ready to run his own program with his new team," Cunningham said at a press conference in St. Louis. "I respect that and wish him well."

Having been in Spinks' corner for the past 13 years, Cunningham probably does, but he can't help him now. That responsibility will fall instead to familiar faces, but ones not all that close to Spinks if the truth be told.

"It's going to be a Spinks reunion," the champion said. "That's going to motivate me more to fight better. I'm going to have two (Olympic) gold medalists and two heavyweight world champions in my corner. They've been helping me in the gym. Everything is perfect."

Not exactly, but Shaw was adamant on Monday that the change in Spinks' corner and the potential cacophony of noise from it between rounds will not change what matters most in boxing – the fighter himself.

"I've seen him since he was eight years old," Shaw said Monday. "I'm just here for Thursday night. There was (already) a game plan in place. Everything has gone smoothly. I got great cooperation from Cory. He's done everything I've asked him to do but there is nothing I can really do. His great potential has yet to be tapped. There is nothing you can do during this time so you leave it where it is."

Considering that with Cunningham in his corner Spinks won the IBF welterweight title by outpointing Michele Piccirillo in Italy and then stunned Ricardo Mayorga and Zab Judah in back-to-back fights to unify the championship before being stopped by Judah in a rematch three years ago there wouldn't seem to be all that much untapped potential, to be frank. Yet like most trainers and all dentists, Shaw sees flawed work in what has preceded his arrival and must now, over time, alter it.

Cunningham surely disagrees privately after leading Spinks to the 154-pound title with a surprising points victory over Roman Karmazin 17 months after the loss to Judah and then a surprisingly competitive split decision loss to Taylor, who towered over him but struggled to hit the flighty Spinks all night at FedEx Forum in Memphis last year.

Now he's back without the architect of those victories in his corner for the first time to defend a title more in keeping with his size. Waiting for him will be a three-time world champion who, to

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be frank, is at 38 in the twilight of his own career. Yet Phillips (41-10-1, 21 KO) knows chaos because he has seen plenty of it himself over the years and understands the kind of move Spinks made so close to defending his title could leave him feeling vulnerable on the night if things don't go as Spinks anticipates.

Of course, for that to be a problem they would have to go as Phillips anticipates, which is to say all wrong for the champion.

"I plan to make him look silly," Phillips said. "I'm hard to hit. My hands are perfect and when my hands connect with him they will be solid. I can fight all night. I'm focused."

Without saying it, the ominous implication was perhaps Spinks was not focused with so much turmoil swirling around him. Spinks downplayed all that, including the changes in his corner, believing as most fighters do that what will matter against Verno Phillips is not who is talking to Spinks but who Phillips is trying to hit.

"I feel great, I look great and I'm ready to be great," Spinks said. "I'm in with a guy you don't play with. Verno knows his way around the ring so you have to be on your game. I will be. He's a stepping stone to bigger fights for me. I know why I'm in there. I'm there to do my job.

"Buddy Shaw has been around for a long time. We always worked together. He was always around. He's familiar with me. He knows I can fight any style. I know my way around the ring. I'm a smart boxer."

Cory Spinks long ago proved that. Whether he made a smart business decision with his last minute training change has nothing to do with boxing however and everything to do with judgment. Whether his judgment that it was time for a change was a wise one time will tell and the telling won't be long in coming.