

## Kassim Ouma: This Is It, Do Or Die

Written by Ron Borges

Wednesday, 26 March 2008 19:00

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Friday night Kassim Ouma will be in a fight for his life. He's used to it.

The former IBF light middleweight champion from Uganda is at what he hopes is the end of a two-fight losing streak that has put in jeopardy his future in boxing. If he cannot overcome the problems posed by former "Contender" series semi-finalist Cornelius "K-9" Bundrage he knows his once burgeoning career might end at the less than glamorous Seneca Allegheny Hotel and Casino in some place called Salamanca, N.Y. Difficult as it may be to fathom, Ouma has had it worse.

If one goes to his website, [Kassimthedream.com](http://Kassimthedream.com), one finds a picture of a pensive Ouma looking down at an unnamed young boy holding a rifle nearly as big as he is. To their right is a place to click on a trailer for a documentary film about both that boy and the man he would become – a smiling former world boxing champion named Kassim Ouma. That's where the smiling ends.

The first image you see on your computer screen is tall grass baked dull yellow by sun and lack of water. It is the kind that is found in much of the Ugandan bush. A gun barrel passes through it, a fitting symbol for an African nation long riddled by first colonial strife and then a bloody and seemingly endless civil war. Ouma, the world now knows, was once one of the warriors in that fight, a little boy toting a rifle that was longer than his legs.

Soon a different Ouma than the one most of the boxing world knows appears on the screen. Gone is his ever-present smile as he speaks with dead eyes of unspeakable things.

"I still have nightmares," the man known as "The Dream" is saying. "Dreaming about me killing people. Dreaming about sleeping and dead bodies...I remember the children screaming and me myself I could not scream. The first time I took somebody's life I was very afraid but I had to do it. Only God can forgive me."

The film is the story of how a child soldier stolen from his classroom at the age of six became first a killer only God can forgive and later a fighter all the world could love. It will premiere at the TriBeCa Film Festival in a month and by that time Ouma will know if he did what he went to a small town in upstate New York to do. He will know if he has resurrected himself once again.

"This is a must-win for Kassim," Ouma said this week after a sweaty gym session two days before he is to face Bundrage. "I'm ready. I'm on it."

Asked if he is nervous because of the high stakes, Ouma's tone changes, just as it did in the trailer. The laughing lilt is gone, replaced by something darker.

"Nervous?" he says, repeating the question. "No. I am a soldier."

That, of course, is the truth. It is also his great burden. At six a boy is not supposed to be a

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solider. He is not supposed to be forced to shoot his best friend. He is not supposed to turn a rifle on people young and old. He is not supposed to be smoking since the age of seven either, although his manager, Tom Moran, knows why that is.

“How is a seven-year old supposed to cope?” Moran asked while talking about the side of Kassim Ouma that was never a dream.

Yet despite all the tragedy and trauma he has known, there will be no sympathy for him Friday night when he squares off with Bundrage. Bundrage could care less about Ouma’s problems. In fact he’s hoping to cause more of them in the main event of ESPN2’s Friday Night Fights card if he can. It is his job. Let Ouma worry about Ouma.

Ouma understands this, just as he understands that after losing a surprisingly competitive fight to middleweight champion Jermain Taylor over a year ago in a match few people felt he could win he allowed himself to be derailed by disappointments and a balky ankle he now says he should have paid more attention to.

Although Ouma lost a unanimous decision to Taylor on Dec. 9, 2006 he had been competitive enough that his promoter, Russell Peltz, walked over to HBO Sports vice-president Kery Davis when it was over and said, “We won.” He didn’t mean the decision. What he meant was his fighter had been more competitive against the bigger man than boxing experts expected and thus had lifted his profile barely a year after having lost the light middleweight championship to Roman Karmazin by a stunningly lopsided score in his first defense.

After winning four straight bouts, Ouma had gone up in weight for a bigger payday despite the long odds and acquitted himself well. Accustomed to living with unspeakable difficulties, facing Jermain Taylor was nothing to fear.

“Everybody said I was too small but he couldn’t knock me out,” Ouma (25-4-1, 15 KO) recalled proudly. “But I didn’t fight a smart fight. I fought with my heart. I chased him all night.”

Taylor was roundly criticized for spending so much of the evening in reverse as the smaller man stalked him in the same savage way he once stalked fighters of a different sort back in Uganda before he escaped the country on a ruse while still a teenage amateur boxer.

From that night was supposed to come a pay-per-view semi-main event against a popular former “Contender” series I champion, Sergio Mora. Ouma had prepared himself well for that night last September, agreeing to leave his home in Florida to train in Philadelphia. But the fight fell through because of an injury to another boxer and somehow he slipped into the kind of funk that can lead to disaster.

It was 11 months before he would fight again and when he did it was a dreadful, spiritless loss by split decision to journeyman Saul Roman last November. Ouma had refused to return to Philadelphia to train this time, working instead near his Florida home for what he was convinced was a tune-up for a big fight in 2008. Reportedly distractions from family and friends were high at the time, his workload low and the outcome decided before the first bell rang. Not even a late

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rally in which Ouma dropped Roman in the eighth round could change the judges' opinion.

Ouma now claims he had injured his ankle in a car accident, which he said limited both his ability to train and to move that night. But pulling out of the bout was never an option. The reason why was simple: 11 months between paydays.

"I had to feed my kids," Ouma said.

He accomplished that but Roman fed him a face full of right hands and when he was done so were Ouma's plans for a fast return to title contention in the division he once appeared likely to dominate for some time. He plummeted out of not only the top 10 but also the top 20 before settling in at a lowly No. 26 ranking. Thus it has come to this - one night, one fight, one option left. Win or else.

"Taking Taylor was about money for everybody," Peltz admitted. "He had nothing to lose. I thought even though he lost it was a positive. It got him back into the picture.

"He trained hard for Mora. He was in good shape. But when that fight fell through he went home and refused to come back to Philadelphia. He's a hard worker in the gym but not one day did I see him boxing. Saul Roman should have been a walkover but he wasn't prepared so now he's in this situation. He'll probably have to take \$10,000 for two or three fights on ESPN now.

"Does he understand that? You tell him. Tom told him. I don't know what he understands. I have a feeling Bundrage (27-3, 16 KO) trained like a monk for 2 ½ months for this. I'm not sure if Kassim did that in Florida. What I know is when Ouma's at his best he beats Bundrage 10 times out of 10."

Moran feels the same way and insists his fighter knows fully the consequences of losing. Tune ups are there to showcase you not to get you beat. If they do the latter, you might well stay out of tune, and out of the limelight, for some time to come.

"Kassim told me he might as well retire if he can't win this kind of fight," Moran said. "He's beaten much better fighters than K-9 but he knows he's got to get back to the Kassim he was or his career becomes a whole different matter.

"When he lost the title to Karmazin he fought without passion. Against Jermain the moment overcame him. Instead of fighting smart he tried to impose his will on the guy. People said it raised his value but to us it wasn't the performance we expected. He fought with a lot of heart but he fought like a guy who didn't have a strategy. He was just chasing Jermain.

"He was excited about fighting Mora. He was wonderful in the gym getting ready but when that fight fell through he lost momentum. He ended up with a long layoff and he was dealing with difficult things going on back home in Uganda with some of his family. He should have beaten Roman easily but he just didn't fight with gusto. He absolutely understands what he has to do against K-9."

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What he has to do is fight like the soldier he once was.

“It is what it is,” Ouma said frankly about the situation he finds himself in. “This is it. Do-or-die. Life or death. I just gotta win.”