

Demetrius Andrade's Golden Opportunity

Written by Ron Borges
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"Two days and a wakeup," as Crocodile Finch used to holler at Mike Tyson when fight night approached, the countdown continuing until the moment the first bell tolled. For Demetrius Andrade, that's how much time is left until the second of what he hopes will be five fights for Olympic gold begins. Two days and a wakeup...assuming he can sleep.

After winning his opening fight in Beijing by outpointing Georgia's Kakhaber Juania, 11-9, in a fight that it appeared he'd won by a wider margin, Andrade now understands to some degree how fickle Olympic scoring can be in boxing. But will he soon enough understand in the way Roy Jones, Jr. once understood when they stole his gold medal in Seoul or the way his teammate, Rau'Shee Warren understood four years ago when his Olympics ended the same day they began?

Hopefully that is a level of understanding the American welterweight will never come to know.

"They missed a lot of my points," Andrade said after barely escaping with a win in his first fight. Frankly that's a familiar refrain every four years from the Olympic boxing venue and not without justification. Yet Andrade is one of America's two brightest hopes at the Beijing Olympics, joining Warren as the only American favorites to win gold medals in boxing, so if they cannot see him scoring what will the judges see?

No one ever knows, a fact that has become old hat for Warren, who is the first American Olympic boxer since Davey Armstrong in 1976 to put himself through this torture chamber twice. Generally American's box only once at the Olympic level before moving on to professional prize fighting but Warren was barely 17 when he went to Athens four years ago and was defeated in his first fight so he and his family decided to commit four more years to the pursuit of a gold medal knowing that the vagaries of five old men in white shirts and pants would decide his fate more than he would.

Now he's in Beijing as a reigning world champion and a flyweight favorite but Warren knows all too well that that may not mean as much as one would hope. As for the 20-year-old Andrade, he's in a far more nerve-wracking situation because he doesn't really know what can happen to an American boxer at the Olympics. He can only imagine and the imagination can be a very dangerous think in sports.

Although the reigning AIBA world welterweight champion, "Boo Boo" Andrade is still only a kid, a kid who will have to beat more than a few grown men to live out his dream. The first of them will be Andrey Balanov of Russia, a 32-year-old veteran of many years of international competition and the former European amateur champion in 2006.

It is a boy facing a man, the latter also being a face familiar to the judges at ringside. Will either of those things matter? Andrade thinks not, although Warren might tell him otherwise after having already lived the downside of the Olympic experience once himself.

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"Nobody in there wants to box me," Andrade said after barely escaping with a win in what degenerated from a boxing match into a wrestling match in the final round, one in which Juania somehow closed the gap on Andrade by winning the fourth round 3-1 despite some visual evidence to the contrary.

"I guess I'm going to have to slug it out, bang out the body shots and then go back to boxing."

The only problem with that strategy is that in international amateur boxing body shots are seldom considered scoring blows despite their corrosive effect on an opponent. That's one reason why four years ago, present WBC welterweight champion Andre Berto was eliminated in his opening fight only to turn pro and quickly become a dominate young prospect.

Now Andrade is wrestling with that reality as much as he likely will be with Balanov in a fight that will advance the winner to Sunday's quarterfinals.

"Everything's good," Andrade claimed. "I'm relaxed and I remain focused on one thing - winning the gold medal. I'm not happy just being in the Olympics, or even winning a silver or bronze. I'm going for gold."

Ranked No. 1 in the world at 152 pounds after winning the world championships, Andrade believes the most dangerous opponents in his weight class are Kazakhstan's Bakhyt Sarsekbayev (Kazakhstan), Thailand's Non Boonjumnong, whom Andrade outpointed to win the world title, and world bronze medalists Adem Kilicci of Turkey and Hmati Silamu of China.

In addition there is always the Cuban, in this case Carlos Banteur. Cuba has won more medals in boxing than any other country for years now and is widely regarded as the world's leading producer of amateur boxing champions. In addition to their skill and experience they are always well received by the judges and fight with a scoring style perfected over the years until it has become the perfect combination of flash and scoring blows for the odd hybrid that is Olympic boxing.

Add to that the seeming judicial favoritism toward them (or prejudice against American fighters, depending on whom you care to believe) and it goes without saying that any fight with a Cuban boxer is a high hurdle to clear.

Yet Andrade is nothing if not confident. A product of the 401 Boxing Club in Cranston, R.I., he is a fighter who believes not only that his AIBA world championship was no fluke but that he is on a golden path in Beijing.

"Nobody they put in front of me can beat me," Andrade claimed before he left for Beijing. "Only the judges can beat me and I'm not going to let them. I'm going to take the other fighters and judges out of it by beating my opponents so badly that they can't take a decision away from me."

As he learned in his opening bout however, that is not as easy as one might think even if you do it. After running out to a 11-6 lead after three rounds over Juania, Andrade found himself

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holding on at the end to barely escape with a puzzling victory.

A two-time U.S. national champion and two-time Golden Gloves champion, Andrade has considerable amateur experience himself but as Rau'shee Warren learned four years ago, all that pales in comparison to what goes on at the Olympic Games, both in the ring and more importantly at the scorers' table.

Two days and a wakeup...assuming he can sleep. That's how long Demetrius Andrade has to wait for part two of what he hopes will be a five-part Olympic dream. If he can't sleep though, who could blame him because he very likely won't be thinking about Balanov as much as he will five old men he knows are now more dangerous to him than the old Russian in front of him ever could be.