

Ron Borges On Rau'Shee Warren Debacle

Written by Ron Borges

Tuesday, 12 August 2008 19:00

Everything that has again gone wrong with USA Boxing this year was fully displayed in the upset and upsetting loss Rau-Shee Warren endured Tuesday in Beijing.

Warren was the first US Olympic boxer to return for a second shot at a gold medal in 32 years, the first since Davey Armstrong competed in the 1972 and 1976 Games rather than turn pro after his first Olympics. In other countries this is a familiar pattern but not in the United States, where our Olympic boxers compete in one Olympiad and then move on to pursue professional careers as prizefighters. That Warren chose to do otherwise was in part because he was one of the youngest boxers in Athens but it was also a testament to his conviction and that of his family that if he stayed the course he would benefit in Beijing.

As it turned out he did not, losing in the first round the same as he had four years ago but this time the defeat was worse because in 2004 he lost because he was a kid who didn't really understand what it took to win in that international cauldron. This time he lost because the team is in disarray, no one listens to the head coach or his assistants and the result has been a disaster.

With the first round not yet completed, four of America's nine fighters have already been eliminated, one even before the Games began when he collapsed unconscious in his room while trying desperately to make weight after being no less than six pounds over the 119-pound limit for the past six months.

But the worse loss to date was Warren's because it exemplified everything wrong with amateur boxing in the United States. Simply put, the coaches are incapable of communicating with their fighters and the fighters can't stand their coaches and are not exactly Batman and Robin when it comes to the team concept. In fact, when it comes to the team concept, these kids have no concept.

This disarray began long before the team left for the Games and it cost Warren dearly. All the ills that have plagued USA Boxing for more than a decade now played out before the world on a very public stage and the conclusion is that something remains sadly, sadly wrong with amateur boxing in the U.S.

While every other country seems able to do a simple thing like relay to its boxer whether he is ahead or behind over the past four days of competition, United States coach Dan Campbell and his assistants have consistently failed to do so. That is in large part, it seems, a result of what became massive communication problems between the 65-year-old Campbell, who is a stern taskmaster, and his young athletes, who have made clear their lack of respect for him.

A near mutiny developed in June when Campbell and USA Boxing officials tried to throw Luis Yanez off the team after he refused to return to the Colorado Springs training camp where the boxing team had been, in the opinion of some of the fighters and their families, held captive for

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the better part of a year. Six of America's nine fighters threatened to walk out and ultimately Yanez, the fighter his teammates chose as their captain despite his outspoken lack of respect for Campbell's authority, was re-instated. To call this mess a team at that point is like calling rap music opera.

Tuesday it all came to an ugly head when Warren trailed by one point, 9-8, with 35 seconds to go in his opening bout with Lee Ok-sung of Korea. One can talk long and loud about the questionable scoring but that's become such a familiar story it's little more than footnote in this loss because what really beat Warren was his refusal to look at his corner during a break in the action because of a problem with Ok-sung's equipment.

Warren stood in a neutral corner and refused to even glance at his Olympic coaches, who claimed they were desperately hollering at him to punch. Instead, Warren came out with his hands at his sides and for the next 32 seconds slid from side to side making no effort to throw a punch. He was in the fistic version of the four-corner offense, stalling like a man who thought he had a lead to protect. Turned out that instead of the four corners it was the rope a dope and the dopes were Warren and his coaches.

Later Warren would say he heard someone in the crowd yelling, "Move! Move!" He heard those voices because those were the ones he was listening to all along, not Campbell and his staff.

Campbell claimed later, "I was confused why he stopped (punching). He said he heard somebody saying to him to move. He was looking up in the stands."

Indeed he was. He was looking at his family and the individual coaches of some of the team members who had come to Beijing to support their fighters in a way that, frankly, undermined the authority of Campbell and his assistants. This, too, is nothing new to USA Boxing. For years personal coaches have worked with the Olympians in hotel rooms away from the team training center going back at least as far as the 1992 Games in Barcelona, which were the first I attended.

But the confusion and disarray has grown with the passage of time until we reached a point where Warren, the U.S.'s most experienced amateur, refused to look at his coaches and then boxed for more than a half minute of the final round while needing a point to tie and two to win with his hands at his sides.

One can blame Warren for not acting like a fighter or an Olympian and that would be correct. One can blame Campbell for being stubborn, hard-headed and for having questionable training methods according to people who have seen him work. One can blame the officials at USA Boxing who came up with the idea of picking the team a year ahead of time and then hiding it in a residency program for much of the final year, forgetting that a 17-year-old may be 119 pounds at the start of that process but struggling to hold that weight by the end of the next year, as Gary Russell did until he collapsed after a plastic-coated training run in Beijing's polluted air.

To see Warren lose as much from lack of communication as anything else and then to watch as he flung his gloves and his headgear out of the ring after he realized what had happened was

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an embarrassment. To see him sobbing after the fight because he had waited four years for this second chance and let it slip away in 35 minutes of confusion was painful.

After it was over, Campbell claimed he was “close to speechless.” He should have been. Then he spoke of his concern that Warren’s quick exit from the Games might adversely affect his remaining five fighters. He said he was going to be sure they spoke with the team’s psychologist because he feared they might be “psyched out.”

That struck me as particularly interesting because four years ago USA Boxing rejected a psychologist uniquely qualified to help our boxers at the Games in favor of a seventh grade gym teacher friendly with a former official of USA Boxing who, in the end, quit before the Games began.

That psychologist was Dr. Wilbert “Skeeter” McClure, an industrial psychologist and college professor who worked with police and other organizations on conflict management and handling stress (which would seem to fit the bill for the US Boxing team) and who also won a gold medal in boxing in 1960 in Rome, where he was Muhammad Ali’s roommate.

McClure went on to a 10-year professional career in which he was ranked as high as No. 3 in the world at a time when that meant something. He also earned a Ph.d in psychology and served for a time as chairman of the Massachusetts Boxing Commission.

Why wouldn’t USA Boxing want a guy like that advising their boxers on how to win in Athens? Maybe because amateur boxing has become more about territorial battles than fistic ones and more about power struggles than the struggle to win medals. That USA Boxing could find no use for such a man makes all the rest of what happened more understandable.

You can’t exonerate Rau’shee Warren or his teammates when they fail to make weight or refuse to listen to their coaches but they are not, as Dan Campbell would have you believe, the only problem here.

The sad ending of Warren’s amateur boxing career was a symptom of a deeper problem that isn’t going to be cured until the adults who run USA Boxing become far more concerned with the athletes and far less concerned with petty territorial battles and the promotion of cronies ill-suited for the responsibility they’ve been given.