

MANFREDO: THIS DAY ALWAYS COMES

Written by Ron Borges

Sunday, 23 November 2008 19:00

Peter Manfredo, Jr. will be 28 years old on Wednesday. That seems a bit early to be facing a professional crossroads in your life but that is the fate of the thinking prize fighter who has lost one time too many at the elite level.

Where most young men that age are looking forward to their peak earning years, the too-often beaten boxer finds himself in another position entirely. A week ago, much against his will, Manfredo joined in the long line of such fighters after being stopped in three rounds by another Contender series alumnus, Sakio Bika, thus losing both the vacant IBO super middleweight title and, quite possibly, his job.

As it is with most professional fighters, Manfredo has been boxing nearly as long as he's been walking. It was never a sport in the way Little League baseball or high school basketball is for most players. Boxing was always a stern and difficult endeavor, even long before he'd collected his first paycheck.

That business took him to two unsuccessful world title challenges and earned him a considerable, although not remarkable, sum of money. But even before the Bika fight, Manfredo had said if he was not successful in his second shot at a world championship he would have to consider whether boxing should continue to be the focus of his life.

As he sagged on the ropes, his eyes glassy and unfocused as Bika beat him down, it was clear the time for him to face what may be his last decision in boxing had come. Yet as obvious as the need for it may be, it is not an easy one to make because, frankly, boxing is all Peter Manfredo, Jr. knows. Give it up now and where do you turn?

"My father raised me to be a prize fighter," Manfredo said nearly a week after he'd been stopped at the Dunkin' Donuts Center in his hometown of Providence. "Nothing else. A prize fighter. So now I'm at a crossroads. I got a wife and three kids. I got to find a career, maybe a union job as an electrician. I gotta stop being selfish and think of my family but it's difficult. Boxing is all I've ever known.

"If I still want to be a world champion I have to box at middleweight. But I don't know if I can still make the weight. The guys at the elite level at 168 are too big, too strong, for me. It's just a mismatch at 168. I'm not going to be a champion at that weight.

"Bika was too big and strong. He blew me out. I went in confident. In training I was sharp and strong and I thought I'd knock him out but he caught me early just like Calzaghe did and got me out of there. He did his job.

"I'm a little disappointed but I was as good as I could be. He was just the better man. So now I gotta make a decision that's not easy."

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Unlike many fighters, Manfredo (31-6, 16 KO) invested much of the money he made in rental properties not jewelry or an entourage, believing they would give him a steady income after boxing. But with the economy in free fall he's found the landlord's life is not an easy one either as he's watched the value of those investments dwindle at the same time his mortgage payments have ballooned.

Like many Americans, Manfredo is boxed in by life at the moment but he carries with him the added burden of a dream denied and a father who has in some ways invested his own life in his son's rise and fall in the ring.

"It's tough having a father and son relationship if you're both in boxing," Manfredo said. "It's more of a business relationship. I never had a father I could lean on. I've said it before – he lived his life through me. He gets mad when I say it but other people see it.

"It's a messed up situation but it's something I grew up with. It could have been worse. He could have been a bust out or something but I don't think you can really be a father and a trainer or a boxer and a son. It don't work that well. How many times have you seen it in boxing? Fathers don't stay fathers if they train their kids and sons don't say sons if they box for them.

"He's a little upset with me right now because he thought I should have boxed Bika more but I don't think if I boxed for 12 rounds it would have mattered. He would have caught up with me. He was just too strong for me. He can't see that."

Despite those familial conflicts, Manfredo has not determined yet if he is finished with fighting, admitting he plans to spend six months looking for day work before he decides if his nights inside the ring are over. It is possible, he admits, that he could work and then train in the evening and on weekends. Certainly many fighters do.

But with three kids, a wife and dwindling faith that he and his father, Peter, Sr., can achieve their dream of success at boxing's highest altitudes the larger issue becomes finding where he can make a living and how he will cope with walking away from what has been his life since he was seven years old.

Boxing demands of its full-time practitioners a spartan existence. It is a solitary life, one where, when the bell rings you stand alone. Then again, so is a life without boxing, as Manfredo has begun to understand.

"I'm in a difficult situation," Manfredo said. "I should have money but I don't. The recession is killing people. They don't pay their rent. I tried to do the right thing (with his money) but here I am.

"I know this. None of my kids will fight. That's for sure. There's nothing but vampires in this sport. It's the only sport where you can make a lot of money and end up with nothing. Not even a pension.

"In a way I'm glad it's over with. I got my own life now. I know no one's going to help me

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because once you lose in boxing you find out how lonely the world can be. I have my family and I got some good friends but I got to get my life together now.

“I knew this day was going to come. This day always comes. I just never thought it would be in the middle of a recession.”

When the end comes for a prize fighter, it's always a recession. A personal one. Peter Manfredo, Jr. is now walking into a world not unlike the one he is leaving, one filled with doubt and the unknown, a world that will test him in ways boxing did not.

Although he did not win a championship, Manfredo became what few fighters do any more - a household name and a popular fighter in his hometown because of his style, a stout heart and a reality TV show called “The Contender.” He made a good living for half a decade or more working in sport's most dangerous landscape but now, in life's prime earning years, he has to leave it all behind and become a real reality fighter. One who gets up every morning and goes to a job without a face or fanfare to work only for his family.

Manfredo has gotten off the floor before so he will surely get through this time as well but there's a sadness to the ending of any dream, even if there may yet be another one down the road. If there is though it won't be found in the cheering arena where he first made a name for himself because that has become a place where his entrance music should be B.B. King singing the old blues dirge, “The Thrill is Gone.”

The thrill is gone

It's gone away for good

Oh, the thrill is gone baby

Baby its gone away for good

Someday I know I'll be over it all baby

Just like I know a man should.”

Until then, Peter Manfredo, Jr., once and still The Pride of Providence, will fight a different fight. It is the difficult one of learning who he is when he's not a prize fighter any more.