

## Diamond Gamboa-Shiny, But Rough

Written by Ron Borges

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When Teddy Atlas watches Yuriorkis Gamboa fight he knows exactly what he's looking at. He's looking at a future world champion. For how long? Who knows?

The 2004 Olympic gold medalist is only 12 fights into his professional career but each one has been the kind of affair that piques the interest of fight fans and even a veteran trainer and boxing analyst like Atlas because everything Gamboa does has a recklessness and a willfulness to it that demand attention be paid. Yet the same things that are making him one of the fastest rising names in the sport are also bringing him perilously close to being someone who could fall as fast as he's risen.

That's why ESPN2 figures to have a strong audience tonight when he fights the main event against a very likely non-competitive journeyman named Roger Gonzalez to open their new season and why when his already planned title challenge against once-defeated Elio Rojas for the WBC interim featherweight title comes around there will be heightened interest among boxing loyalists.

But will the four-time Cuban national champion who defected to search for his fortune in a boxing ring become a fighter whose legend lives long after he's gone or will he be another shooting star who flashes across the sky for a moment and then flames out of his own volition?

"That's what you don't know about him," Atlas said of Gamboa. "I see him becoming a world champion but I don't know how long he'll stay a world champion.

"He's reckless in his approach and in his regard for the game. He has tremendous speed and power but he doesn't pay tribute to good habits inside the ring like keeping his hands up.

"He knows he has skill and he knows how hard he worked in Cuba to hone those skills and that has given him a fighter's confidence but his talent and that confidence have also combined to lead him to a place where he thinks they can override other things that have to be paid attention to, like fundamentals and the technical side of boxing.

"Regardless of your talent you have to practice those things to have longevity. You can have success with what he has – talent and a great fighter's temperament – but his strengths are also his weakness. Confidence becomes arrogance and arrogance becomes foolishness and that can become a disaster."

Gamboa has already been down several times, having been dropped by guys he was dominating because too often he has his hands slung low and leaps forward without maintaining proper distance. What that has led to is Gamboa being timed perfectly by opponents with the inclination to fight back and a resulting unscheduled and unexpected trip to the floor.

Those have thus far been only brief stops on his way to having his hand raised but they are also

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warning signs, alarming reminders that someone who doesn't respect what can happen inside the ring may one day learn how harsh its realities can be.

"He has beyond good talent," Atlas said. "He has almost extraordinary talent. Hand speed. Strength. Power. The mortar that holds all that together is supreme confidence, that belief that he will always win, and he has that too.

"That confidence is as noticeable in the ring as his hand speed and his explosiveness. It makes him an exciting guy, a guy who will make money in boxing, which is what he wants of course. People will want to see him because he has a ring presence. He makes you believe when he's in there that you're watching someone special, which you are.

"Because he has confidence that borders on arrogance he'll take chances he doesn't need to take to prove his point. He's gotten away with it because he has good instincts but he does what a lot of young guys do who have too much youth for their talent. He's reckless in a way that could get him hurt one night.

"It's a little like giving a kid a powerful sports car before he knows enough about driving to respect it. He's gonna run red lights. A gifted fighter like Gamboa is gonna jump in from too far away instead of working his way in and because of his talent he'll get away with it most of the time. But one night you do that with the wrong guy, maybe a guy not as talented but somebody who is sounder in his fundamentals and just confident as you, and that's the night you run the sports car into a telephone pole."

Gamboa has already experienced that but emerged only with a dented grill or a bruised ego. Although he's been knocked down several times always he's gotten up and made opponents pay dearly for their moment. To Atlas, that is a sign that his chin is not his problem. His problem is, well, fundamental.

"There's a reason why people with less talent knock off people with more talent," Atlas said. "It's not going to happen Friday night and it may not happen for a while but there are ways to even the genetic playing field if you can grab other areas. That's the downside for Gamboa.

"The negative is he's been down already. The positive is he gets up and wins. You can't really say a guy has a bad chin until he doesn't get up. I've seen him get hit clean and hard and he got up so I'd say he has a good chin. It's not like he's been dropped by glancing blows.

"The reason he's been in those situations can be corrected because it's his fundamentals not his chin. When he's gone down it was because coming in he left too much of a gap and usually his hands were too low. He was disrespectful of what can happen in the ring and the guy timed him because instead of getting defensive and backing out when Gamboa attacked, the guy stood his ground.

"Nobody's been able to take advantage of that yet. They haven't been able to land a second shot. But one day there will be a moment beyond where he's been. Some place, some time, there will be a going beyond that moment when a guy hits him with two instead of one. If his

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people are cognizant of that – and not many are these days in boxing – that’s where they need to lead the way.

“If they do, he could be a great champion. If they don’t how long he keeps a title will be up for discussion.”

The difficult thing for his trainer, Ismael Salas, is to impart those lessons without restraining Gamboa’s aggressiveness or stunting his natural confidence. There is a thin line in a boxing ring between wisdom and wariness, a line that once crossed alters forever the kind of fighter you are. It is that line where Gamboa now stands.

At the moment, he is all about bold aggression. He wins in the same overwhelming way Mike Tyson once did, making fans care less about the quality of his opponent because they are more focused on the spectacular way he gets rid of the problem in front of him.

The trainer’s delicate balancing act with such a talent must fall somewhere between the danger he knows lurks inside the ring and the bold confidence required to succeed in such a place. That is the side of Yuriorkis Gamboa’s development that Atlas finds most intriguing and believes is most imperative.

“From a trainer’s perspective his greatest strength is his attitude,” Atlas said. “I know a lot of guys with speed and power but they don’t try to shove it down your throat. This guy does. He wants to use what he has.

“You’ll never have a night where you leave the arena and say you didn’t see Gamboa’s speed tonight. You didn’t see his ability tonight. He comes to the arena to show off what he has.

“That’s why he practiced all those hours in those hot gyms in Cuba. He knows he invested that time and he wants the world to see what he got back. But he also learned pretty quickly over here that there’s a lot of competition out there for who is going to get paid.

“I think that forces him to be a little bit undisciplined. He wants to show off that pure talent because he has a stage here that didn’t exist in the amateurs and he sees that over here the more you show off the more you get paid. That kind of thing is airborne. It’s understood among these kinds of guys.

“The same hunger that made him sell his gold medal in Cuba so he could pay for his daughter’s birthday party has created a dangerous hunger in him to make money. It’s dangerous to you and it’s dangerous to him.”

That side of Gamboa has left Atlas feeling two ways about him. On the one hand he is always anxious to see him fight but when he sees that dangerous side emerge, that disrespectful side for the most dangerous sport in the land, it irritates his professional sensibilities.

“I dedicated my whole life to boxing,” Atlas said. “You look for a special guy like this guy. I enjoy watching him but the trainer side of me gets irked when he takes chances he doesn’t need to

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take because I know where that's going to lead one night. It irks me when he ignores the basics of boxing because I know what's coming with that too.

“You see a diamond like Gamboa you want it to be polished perfectly. You don't want any rough edges. He deserves to be every bit he can be, which is a lot. But he won't be if those flaws aren't polished out.”

And so you watch and wait to see who wins this race – Yuriokis Gamboa's great gifts or boxing's cruel insistence that it be respected even by those whom it has blessed.