

Naazim Likes Mosley In Upset Over Margarito

Written by Bernard Fernandez
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Naazim Richardson's personal preference is to introduce his fighters to boxing at an early age and to painstakingly guide them along the path that, hopefully, someday will lead to world titles and extended title reigns.

Richardson, whose products of Philadelphia's Concrete Jungle boxing team for the most part are related to him, is still waiting for that long-term vision to be realized. The closest thing he has to a made-from-scratch champion is his son, 27-year-old welterweight prospect Rock Allen (14-0, 7 KOs), who began boxing at 8 and was a member of the 2004 U.S. Olympic team that competed in Athens, Greece.

Other fighters whom Richardson has nurtured, in some cases for nearly two decades, include sons Tiger Allen (Rock's twin brother) and Bear Richardson and their cousins, Karl "Dynamite" Dargan and Mike "Sharp" Dargan.

Brother Naazim, as he is known in gyms around the country, probably is best known as the trainer of ageless wonder Bernard "The Executioner" Hopkins, 44, whose corner he has worked for over a decade, but as the chief second only since the Jermain Taylor rematch in 2005, when he rose to the top spot after Hopkins had a falling-out with his longtime instructor, Bouie Fisher. But one of the fight game's best-kept secrets could find his own star shining more brightly if his newest pupil, "Sugar" Shane Mosley (45-5, 38 KOs), pulls off the upset in Saturday night's challenge of WBA welterweight titlist Antonio Margarito (37-5, 27 KOs) at the Staples Center in Los Angeles.

Richardson is replacing Mosley's father, Jack Mosley, whose on-again, off-again relationship with his son once more is off, at least in a professional sense.

"After Shane signed to fight Margarito, I got a call from his wife, Jin, asking me if I was interested in working with him because they were going to go in a different direction," Richardson said. "I said, 'OK, so long as there's no controversy.' I didn't want it to seem like I was pushing Jack to the side. Jin said, 'No, this is our decision and you're our first choice.' It was made very clear to me that if I wasn't available, they weren't going to go back to Jack. They would simply hire someone else. 'It's time we moved on,' she said.

"I've always been a big fan of Shane's, so I said, 'Of course I'll work with him. It'd be an honor.'"

Richardson has never been much of a hired gun, taking on established fighters who were looking for the boost occasionally generated by a change in the corner. But he had a history with Shane Mosley that made it feel almost as if he was helping another family member, which made the challenge a bit more intriguing.

"Me and Shane would always talk at different fights," Richardson said. "I guess we had a lot of

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similarities in the way we approached certain things in the boxing business.

“I guess I first met Shane when my sons were little kids and they were fighting in the Blue & Gold tournament (in California). Rock and Tiger must have been about 12 or 13. They took pictures of Shane, and obviously were impressed by him.

“When we came home, all I heard was Shane Mosley this, Shane Mosley that. They talked me to death about Shane. I said, ‘Well, Shane’s got a big house. You want to move out there with him?’

“But, really, Shane is a wonderful person. Everybody feels that way when they meet him. He’s polite to everyone. And he’s a great student (of boxing), a lot like Bernard, so it’s not hard to transfer philosophies to him.”

Richardson’s role, as he sees it, is not necessarily to tear down and reconstruct the 37-year-old Mosley. It’s more to study Margarito for flaws and weaknesses that can be exploited on fight night.

“With every job I’ve ever taken in boxing, my first question is, ‘What exactly are you asking of me?’ he said. “When I find out what my job description is, I stay in my lane.

“Now, with Shane Mosley, my primary goal is not to teach him how to box. He knows how to box. My primary goal is to study Margarito and to formulate the very best fight plan I can. If I can put together the right fight plan, and it’s executed by an exceptional athlete like Shane Mosley, usually you get a good outcome.”

Which is not to say that Mosley is so set in his ways that Richardson can’t tweak a thing or two. As always, the trainer goes to his extensive tape library to unearth clues as to what works for individual fighters and what doesn’t. For Richardson, the past is always prologue.

“One thing I did was to study some of the tapes I had of Shane when he was an amateur,” Richardson said. “I saw something Vernon Forrest had exploited way back when. When Shane was undefeated and the world champion, Forrest exploited the same, exact thing.”

Reviewing old tapes, many dating back to a fighter’s amateur career, is a trademark of the Richardson way.

“When Bernard fought Antwun Echols, and when he fought Robert Allen, I went back to the amateur tapes I had on those guys,” he said. “Man, they were making some of the same damn mistakes they were making when they were kids! Maybe they had learned to mask those mistakes a little better, but they were still there.”

The reason why certain faults linger, uncorrected, is the same reason why Richardson sometimes is criticized for bringing fighters like his son, Rock Allen, along more carefully than some people think is prudent.

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“I just watched Andre Berto have a world of trouble with (Luis) Collazo,” Richardson said. “Berto was a beast as an amateur, talented as could be. But Collazo pretty much exploited him the other night. What’s that prove? It proves that you need to take your time and learn so that when you get the belt (Berto retained his WBC welterweight title on a controversial unanimous decision), you know how to keep it and keep it for a while.

“Some guys, it’s like they get their GED and they think they know all there is to know. Smart fighters keep learning until they go to college, in a boxing sense, and start earning advanced degrees. There’s more to having longevity in this business than coming along with hot talent.

“The ones that don’t learn as they go, you seem them making the same mistakes over and over. The smart ones figure out what’s wrong, they fix it and they don’t make the same mistake again.”

Richardson, not surprisingly, cites Hopkins as an example of a serious student of boxing who has used his ring smarts to sustain and even embellish his career past a point when the aging process should have eroded his physical skills far more than they have.

“When Bernard fought (Felix) Trinidad, everybody said he was too old then, and he was only, like, 36,” Richardson said. “But he wasn’t too old, was he? And he wasn’t too old against (Kelly) Pavlik either.

“Some fighters are just exceptional that way, but a lot of it has to do with the way you approach your craft. If you look at the 20-year-old Roy Jones and put him in with the Roy Jones of today, the 20-year-old Roy Jones would wipe the floor with today’s Roy Jones within two rounds.

“Now, if the 20-year-old Bernard Hopkins fought the Bernard Hopkins of today, the 20-year-old Bernard Hopkins would get his ass whipped. He’d get embarrassed.”

So which is Mosley? Is he more like Jones at this deep stage of his boxing life, or more like Hopkins?

“More like Hopkins,” Richardson said. “The 20-year-old Shane Mosley couldn’t beat this Shane Mosley. He’d get dominated. When guys learn their craft and become true students of the sport, they become better fighters. That’s why you want to move some fighters along slow, so they can be better at 30 than they were at 25.”

Richardson, of course, has gone to his tape vault to find out what it is about Margarito that Mosley can take advantage of. He already believes he knows what Mosley could do that would work in rematches with Forrest and Miguel Cotto, against whom he is 0-2 and 0-1, respectively.

“Cotto moves like a boxer, but he’s not actually a boxer,” Richardson said in assessing Margarito’s highest-profile victim. “He can emulate a boxer pretty well because he’s been in the gym with guys like that for so long, at so many different levels. But what he actually is, is a slugger.

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“You see it whenever he goes to punch. He’s up on his toes, but he goes flat-footed whenever he’s sets himself to punch. And that’s when Margarito would catch him.

“That little stop-and-start gave Margarito a chance to wear him down. Some guys get discouraged by getting beat up. A beating don’t mean nothing to them, unless it’s some kind of exceptional beating. They’re going to keep walking through the beating. Margarito was taking an ass-whipping from Cotto, but that didn’t discourage him.

Cotto, on the other hand, got discouraged when he found himself in with a guy he couldn’t stop. Cotto likes to walk to you and break you down, and when he didn’t see this dude breaking down – he didn’t see blood coming from his nose, or his face reddening – he started to fold up mentally.”

OK, so maybe Mosley can put that knowledge to use against Cotto, if and when they ever fight again. But what of Margarito? How do you discourage someone who doesn’t discourage easily, if at all?

Richardson isn’t giving away any trade secrets here, but maybe he already has. For guys for whom a regular beating don’t mean nothing, then you have to put an exceptional beating on them.

Richardson understands what a successful run with Mosley can mean to his own reputation. He has been nominated for the Condon-Futch Award as 2008’s Trainer of the Year by the Boxing Writers Association of America, but in conjunction with former WBA middleweight champion John David Jackson, who serves as Hopkins’ assistant trainer. Even when he is receiving more recognition than ever, Richardson doesn’t even get full credit.

He says it doesn’t irk him, but every man has his pride, you know? He believes he would be more of a household name if he weren’t so selective, if he expanded the parameters of his operation to include all comers.

If that sounds like a bit of a potshot at Freddie Roach, who took over as B-Hop’s lead trainer when Richardson was recovering from a minor stroke, well, make of it what you will.

“I was hoping (Joe) Calzaghe would take a rematch with Bernard because I’d love to be in a position to head up Bernard’s camp,” said Richardson, who noted that he took a secondary position to Roach for a fight Hopkins lost on April 19, 2008, on a split decision. “I really felt that by me being sick, I wasn’t there for Bernard as much as I should have been for his fights with Winky Wright and Calzaghe. The last time I was able to run his camp my way was for (Antonio) Tarver.”

And we all know how that one turned out. B-Hop tuned up the “Magic Man” in one of the finest performances of his luminescent career.

“Not taking anything away from Freddie Roach, but I’ve worked with coaches in Philadelphia who were really good but never got anywhere near his level of recognition,” Richardson said.

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“Kenny Weldon told me years ago that I had the potential to be a great coach, but I never would be because I love my fighters too much. I didn’t understand what he meant then, but I think I do now.

“You work with a hundred guys, you got a chance to be on TV a hundred times. Some of them win, some of them don’t, but that’s the numbers game. Let’s face it, it’s easier to win if you work with a bunch of guys who already knew how to fight when they came to you.”

So maybe Shane Mosley, by definition, can’t be Richardson’s masterwork. Maybe Hopkins really can’t be, either. Maybe that imprimatur of greatness, the same one that has been stamped upon the Emanuel Stewards, Cus D’Amatos and Eddie Fatches, won’t be there for Richardson until Rock Allen and a couple of other Concrete Jungle alums complete the journey from boxing neophytes to adult champions.

But for Naazim Richardson, the arrival at some glorious destination is only as worthwhile as the arduousness of the trip itself.

“It can be funny sometimes, the relationship between a coach and a fighter,” he said. “There comes a time when every fighter has to decide which route he wants to go, and who he wants to be on his team.

“I’ve told my sons they could go another way if they wanted to, and I’d be OK with that if it turned out to be the best thing for them. But changing for the sake of changing isn’t always the right thing to do.

“(Music producer) Damon Dash fell apart from his partner, Jay-Z. Damon Dash said, ‘I made Jay-Z. And Jay-Z said, ‘Well, if you made me, make another me.’ That was a heck of a statement.

“It’s like I tell my amateur kids. I say, ‘If you leave this gym, come back in a year and I’ll have a different national champion.’ Sometimes fighters can take a coach for granted, and sometimes coaches can take a fighter for granted. It happens all the time. But I’m pretty comfortable with who I am and what I bring to the equation.”