Now that Naazim Richardson has taken his place at the head table reserved for boxing's celebrity trainers, you have to wonder if the road to recognition was like this for such legendary cornermen as Ray Arcel, Eddie Futch, Jack Blackburn, Cus D'Amato, Charley Goldman, Angelo Dundee and Emanuel Steward.

Great trainers, one would presume, must know how to properly condition their boxers, craft intelligent fight plans, make in-bout adjustments on the fly and push the proper buttons when extra motivation is needed at a critical moment. But is the ability to do all that always enough to gain a reputation as one of the sport's finest teachers? How much is attributable to simply being in the right place at the right time? Having one or more gifted pupils whose high-visibility successes serve to illuminate your contributions?

Larry Holmes, after he had been heavyweight champion of the world for a good, long while, once offered the opinion that the shifting cast of characters in his corner were necessary evils, unable to add to or detract from the boxing acumen he had already accumulated. Others – such as Shane Mosley, who was lavish in his praise of Richardson after last Saturday night's stunning, nine-round beatdown of Antonio Margarito – have no hesitancy in suggesting that the right voice in the gym and on fight night can be the deciding factor in any bout, all other factors being more or less equal.

Richardson, best known as a longstanding trainer of Bernard "The Executioner" Hopkins, but only occasionally in the lead role since 2005, became a hot commodity because his exquisite fight plan was followed so perfectly by Mosley against Margarito, and because his observations of the manner in which the "Tijuana Tornado's" hands were wrapped before the fight led to the impounding of hard inserts in those wraps. The prefight drama in Margarito's dressing room – the California commission at this date has yet to announce its findings -- at least hinted that the soon-to-be-dethroned WBA welterweight champion's already formidable punching power sometimes has been enhanced by artificial means.

Considering that Richardson was at the forefront of another hand-wrap expose, when he successfully argued to New York State Athletic Commission officials that Felix Trinidad's hands were illegally wrapped prior to his Sept. 29, 2001, middleweight unification showdown with Hopkins in Madison Square Garden (B-Hop won on a stunning, ninth-round stoppage), his increasingly high visibility might owe as much to his keen eye for possible rules infractions as well as for his more standard duties.

Like that noted baseball philosopher, Yogi Berra, once observed, it's amazing how much you can see by looking.

That 1-2 punch delivered by Richardson – Mosley benefiting first from the dressing room flap, then from the tactical suggestions offered by his new trainer, for which Margarito's chief second, Javier Capetillo, seemingly had no answer – vaulted the Philadelphian from the ranks of

I-think-I've-heard-of-him trainers into elite status.

By the end of the seventh round, HBO blow-by-blow announcer Jim Lampley was advising viewers that every big-name fighter considering a change in his corner almost certainly would soon be putting Richardson on speed-dial.

Steward, the Hall of Fame trainer whose humble beginnings with amateur kids at Detroit's Kronk Gym 30-plus years ago mirrors Richardson's grunt work with the Concrete Jungle Boxing Team in gritty North Philadelphia, joined Lampley in singling out Sugar Shane's new guy as a master instructor whose ability to wring the most out of his charges only now is being recognized after years of laboring in the shadows.

"I don't think words can even describe how much he has improved his worth," Manny said when asked about Richardson.

"It started with Bernard's upset win over Kelly Pavlik. Then to have another major upset with Shane – which was a little difference because Shane was working with Naazim for the first time, whereas Bernard has been with him for so long – it was like a revelation. Naz came away from (Mosley-Margarito) with a better image, a higher niche … everything."

Not bad for someone who, not so very long, was so debilitated by a stroke that he barely could speak or mount the three steps to the corner without becoming exhausted. Although Richardson remained on Hopkins' payroll for his bouts with Winky Wright and Joe Calzaghe, it was in a secondary role to Freddie Roach.

Now fully recovered, or close to it, Richardson is demonstrating that he is back, and back in a big way.

"One of the things we didn't even get around to mentioning during the telecast, which we should have, was that just over a year ago this man was so physically handicapped that he could hardly speak or walk up the steps," Steward said.

"Now he comes along and gives two of the best performances of any trainer's life, back go back. It's just unreal. Naz's work with Bernard and Shane these last two fights showed technique, strategy, planning. I was so impressed that he didn't try to completely overhaul Shane. During my interviews with Naz, he wasn't, like, `I'm bringing this and that to the table.' He didn't make it all about himself, like one guy I can think of."

If you think the mystery egomaniac to whom Steward is referring to is the person who sired a recently retired welterweight champion and pound-for-pound king, that probably would be an astute guess.

But if Steward detects something special in Richardson, someone else is going to have to play devil's advocate, if only for the purpose of sparking a debate. Not surprisingly, that person is another noted trainer, ESPN2 "Friday Night Fights" color analyst Teddy Atlas.

"He'll be the flavor of the month, like Buddy McGirt was," Atlas said of the former WBC welterweight champion whose reputation was buffed and burnished during a heady run a few years ago with Antonio Tarver, Vernon Forrest and Arturo Gatti. "There's a whole succession of guys that get noticed in big fights and gain recognition, with recognition equation into more work for a while. The boxing business is fickle that way."

So which is Richardson? A professor of pugilism worthy of his new-found acclaim? Or, as Atlas at least wonders, a holder of a winning lottery ticket whose good fortune is as much the product of luck as of actual expertise?

"Richardson had two experienced fighters in Hopkins and Mosley," Atlas said. "Come on. I don't know who or what he is. Those guys had a lot of success before he came along. Not taking away anything from him, but, jeez, keep things in perspective.

"Those were made-to-order opponents. Pavlik was made to order for an experienced fighter who could box a little bit, who could stay calm, not be broken down by pressure and knew how to counterpunch. I mean, that's Boxing 101.

"And it was the same thing (with Mosley-Margarito). Margarito now has six losses in his career. He's a guy who walks straight in. It's hard to miss him. He broke down (Miguel) Cotto, but he got hit with a lot of punches before that. Really, his style was made to order for Mosley.

"Mosley didn't look much different than I've seen him look in the past. The way he fought is the way he usually fights."

Gauging the true value of coach to player, of trainer to fighter, is a question which has long been debated. In team sports, circumstances matter, too. Former quarterback Terry Bradshaw, the winner of four Super Bowl championships with the "Steel Curtain"-era Pittsburgh Steelers, once was asked for his opinion of Archie Manning, a gifted passer for mostly dreadful New Orleans Saints teams during his NFL career.

"If Archie had played with the Steelers, and I had been with the Saints, he'd have those four rings and everybody would be talking about poor Terry," Bradshaw concluded.

Makes you wonder, doesn't it? Casey Stengel won nine American League pennants and seven World Series in 13 seasons with the New York Yankees, but he finished last in all four seasons with the New York Mets, an expansion team he took over in 1962. Did the "Old Perfesser" suddenly stop being a genius in the dugout? Or did his winning percentage dip precipitously because he had to write Marv Throneberry's and Choo-Choo Coleman's names on the lineup card every day instead of Mickey Mantle's and Roger Maris'?

Would the sad-sack Washington Generals have started beating the Harlem Globetrotters if Phil Jackson was diagramming isolation plays for Red Klotz instead of Michael Jordan?

There are those who insist that Bouie Fisher is one of the finest trainers ever in Philadelphia, but the veteran of so many gym tutorials didn't start to get his due until Hopkins came along and

blossomed, like a spring flower, into the future Hall of Famer we know him to be. Same with the venerable Bill Miller in Detroit until James Toney showed up.

Truth be told, talent-devoid fighters could benefit only so much from having a brilliant trainer in their corner, just as otherworldly fighters like Sugar Ray Robinson and Muhammad Ali probably couldn't have been screwed up that badly by having substandard seconds barking out instructions. Somehow, some way, their natural brilliance would have shone through.

But put just the right fighter with just the right trainer and magic can happen. It's a partnership, like Fred and Ginger, Montana to Rice, Butch and Sundance. One can make the other look good, and vice versa.

Richardson's fondest dream is to take some of the Concrete Jungle fighters he introduced to boxing, most notably his son, welterweight prospect Rock Allen, to pro titles. The long road to the top always is more satisfying than the quick fix. Steward started out that way, putting his faith in Tommy Hearns and riding the skinny kid's comet's tail to a shared superstardom. Once he became established, Manny continued to build upon his legacyby taking on such noted fighters as Evander Holyfield, Oscar De La Hoya, Lennox Lewis and Wladimir Klitschko and making them better.

Maybe it'll be that way for Richardson, too, if the pied piper's tune played by Hopkins and now Mosley leads even more star clients in need of a career rejuvenation to his door. Flavors of the month have been known to become flavors of the year and of the decade, if the taste of what they're churning out is delectable enough for mass consumption.

And, until further notice, it doesn't get much sweeter than that double scoop of Sugar Shane that Richardson helped lay on the unfortunate Margarito.