

Andre Ward: Ready for the Bright Lights?

Written by Raymond Markarian
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The lights will be bright when Andre Ward takes on Edison Miranda on May 16th. Easily the hottest beam bulb Andre Ward has ever felt in the boxing ring. But the Oakland native says he has been expecting this moment to come for some time. When Ward was nine years old his father introduced him to an aspiring boxer named Virgil Hunter. Since then, Ward and Hunter have worked together in an attempt to perfect the 'Slip n Slide' style of boxing, once used by former heavyweight champion Jack Johnson, and currently professed by boxing trainers in South Texas.

Ward has dreamt of becoming the young promising star that dethrones an already proven opponent. He speaks of this often. He wants to become the Floyd Mayweather to Diego Corrales, Oscar De la Hoya to Julio Cesar Chavez, or Roy Jones Jr. to James Toney.

Comparing Ward's current opponent Edison Miranda to any one of the proven warriors above is a stretch, but the Colombian has already competed against some of the top fighters in the middleweight division, Pavlik, and Abraham. And the encounter between Ward and Miranda has the same basic formula as the above mentioned fights; the proven commodity against the relatively unproven.

We have seen what Miranda brings to the table against some of the best the sport has to offer, but Ward has some questions to answer to the boxing public on Saturday night. Is he simply an overhyped Olympic champion? Or is he a true contender, a future champ?

Perhaps more than another other sport, in boxing, a fighter's immediate future can be determined with a single blow. A reality check in boxing is brutally honest. A fighter can lose all credibility by raising his arm to slow to block a punch to the head, or a shot to the body.

So when Ward spoke with me about his preparations for the biggest fight of his life, he sounded irritated by Edison Miranda's antics. Anytime Miranda talks trash, Ward remains silent and says he will let his performance in the ring tell the story.

"I definitely keep it in my mind. But I am going to respond at the right time, in the ring." Ward said about Miranda's trash talking. "I am going to respond when I am paid to respond. I am going to respond when it matters the most, not on a conference call, that shows weakness. If you say you are going to knock me out, I am going to take you at your word. But I am not going to respond in a negative way."

In preparation for a bout, Ward rarely leaves the friendly confines of Kings Gym in Oakland, Ca, but his camp was based out of Las Vegas for nearly six weeks to prepare for this fight. Ward views the move as a blessing, especially because many of his closest friends and relatives are attending his first hometown professional fight.

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lot of news about this fight, and people have been trying to ask me questions, but I wanted to focus. This is business. This is serious, serious stuff. A man says he is going to knock you out; you have to take him at his word. That is one reason why I left home; I am taking him at his word.”

Ward says he has never really stopped training since returning from a knee injury that forced him out of the ring for nearly six months. He says it is business as usual when Saturday night arrives.

“My training is strict and hard for every fight.” Ward said. “I have been training hard since I was an amateur that is the only way that I know how to train. But the stakes are higher, so there is more on the line now. My life will change by beating this guy, naturally, status wise as well.”

So it is important to look spectacular then?

“I just have to beat him, I have to win. Looking good will take care of itself, I just have to beat him. It may be ugly at times. Trust me, he thinks it is going to be a run and gun fight, where he is chasing me down all night. He has another thing coming. He is going to realize that I am stronger than he is. He is going to be surprised with my strength. And he is going to believe that everything people have told him is a lie.”

Virgil Hunter, Ward’s longtime trainer told TSS that a portion of their training camp is based on defending Miranda’s roughhouse tactics. Miranda is notorious for freely throwing cheap shots below the belt or behind the head to get an edge. Ward says he is ready to give whatever comes at him.

“I am definitely aware of it. But he is going to get what he gets, and then some. People don’t understand. This fight is going answer a lot of questions about me from the media, fans, and other fighters. But when you know what you have on the inside you don’t have to broadcast it. I don’t have to go on the blow-horn to tell everybody that I have heart. You do not get as far as I have gotten; number one without God fighting for you, and number two without some kind of heart and determination. You don’t get that far in the amateurs or the pros.”

Ward’s courage under fire has come into question throughout his professional career. He has taken some heavy blows on a few occasions but came out victorious nevertheless. In 2005, a knockdown, and close decision victory against the relatively unknown Darnell Boone, has many boxing observers, fans, media, and fighters alike, questioning Ward’s quest to become a champion. However the Oakland native views distress in the ring as a growing pain. He admits to his faults but states that he has learned from the mistakes.

“I’ve been knocked down. I’ve been stunned before.” Ward said. “But nobody talks that much about me getting up and continuing on. They just stop at ‘hey he got knocked down.’ It takes a lot of determination (to get back up.) When you are on the canvas, there are some questions to answer. Do I stay down? It would be a whole lot easier if I just roll over right now. It takes something to get up. And I think I have proven that. I am going to continue doing so, and I think this fight is going to prove it. He is going to come out swinging. He is going to come out blazing.

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But when I come back blazing, then people are going to say 'hey, he had more than we thought he had.' I am just looking forward to the showcase."

Miranda's rambunctious style has provided some of the best boxing brawls in recent memory. His powerful overhand right is the blow Ward should be aware of. Miranda broke Arthur Abraham's jaw in a controversial losing effort in 2006, and went blow for blow with Kelly Pavlik until getting KO'd in 2007. However, the Ward camp views Miranda's two knockout losses to Pavlik and Abraham, (in their second fight) as a weakness to exploit.

"I am not looking for the knockout, but he has been down and knocked out before, so it can happen again." Ward said.

No matter who or what he is compared to, Andre Ward's fight against Edison Miranda must be a success. His plans in boxing are much bigger than Edison Miranda. Ward wants to be an ambassador to the game. Ward says that he wants to help lead the new generation of boxing talent into the homes of American sports fans.

"When you win a lot of people listen to you. When you are successful in life people listen to you. So by us preparing, and taking care of business, people are going to see that I did not respond to Miranda the way he usually makes people respond to that kind of stuff. I will lead by example. And just continue to do what I have been doing but just stepping it up a notch each time I get into the ring."