

The Last Word On: Ward/Miranda

Written by Ron Borges
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Over the weekend Andre Ward aced the worst kind of test. He looked great against someone he should have looked great against if he is ever to become what his promoter, Dan Goossen, hopes he'll be.

The difficulty in this kind of test is while no one can be totally sure what it proves to beat up a flawed former middleweight contender like Edison Miranda, it would have been obvious what it proved if he hadn't. That is a risk without much of a reward except from people who are desperately looking for a reason to declare someone the next big thing but it must be taken, and Ward handled it with aplomb.

The only American to win an Olympic gold medal in boxing this century, Ward is a solid young man and a solid young fighter. He has skills, has been brought along patiently and carefully (some might say too carefully) and is really the best young American hope at the moment at 168 pounds.

But exactly what we learned about him against Miranda is more difficult to decipher, at least as it relates to challenging someone like the undefeated Brit Carl Froch, who presently holds the World Boxing Council version of the super middleweight title as well as a recent knockout defeat of former middleweight champion Jermain Taylor.

Miranda was once himself considered a promising middleweight contender until both Kelly Pavlik and Arthur Abraham put him to sleep inside the distance. After that, the mesmerizing quality of his punching power was counter balanced by his atrocious defense and the fact that, like many power punchers, his chin seems a bit suspect, as does his stamina.

Now all Miranda has left to really hang his hat and his reputation on is a win over Allan Green that looks more and more like the exception rather than the rule. There was also once a hotly disputed earlier defeat on points to Abraham in which Miranda broke the middleweight champion's jaw but when Miranda couldn't finish him off he ended up being slapped around the rest of the night and losing a decision before being knocked cold in the rematch. As a resume building effort the latter was not helpful.

So the fact that the undefeated (19-0, 12 KO) Ward defeated the wild-swinging and often wide open Miranda (32-4, 28 KO) in decisive fashion in his first ring appearance back in his hometown of Oakland, CA. means something. How much is the question?

Not surprisingly, Ward said it was his coming out party even though the fight was telecast on ShoBox not SHOWTIME or HBO. He declared himself ready to challenge Froch or any of the other super middleweight belt holders. If Goossen is wise, which he usually is, that's the direction they'll go – after one of the other belt holders.

Ward should willingly travel up to Montreal to challenge IBF champion Lucien Bute, who leaves

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Canada less often than guys with visa problems, or perhaps call out World Boxing Organization champion Karoly Balzsay. If those guys make some of you say, "Who?" so be it. Seasoning may still be necessary before Ward is ready for Froch and if it comes along with a world title belt attached it's a bonus.

It should not go unnoticed that neither Ward nor Goossen, who while not as bombastic as Don King has been known to use some hyperbole from time to time, mentioned the name of World Boxing Association champion Mikkel Kessler. That's a good idea and showed some understanding of where Ward stands on his career path at the moment.

Clearly Ward has the ability to win a world championship even though he lacks superior punching power. With a few more difficult fights against experienced and resilient boxers like Bute and Balzsay he might be ready to step up to the level of Froch or even Kessler. But nothing that happened in the Miranda fight made that clear.

Ward showed calm and resilience when Miranda appeared to purposely butt him in the opening round, opening up a cut over Ward's left eye that could have been a problem had he let it become one. That he did not spoke well of Ward, who weathered Miranda's predictable early storm and then began to break him down until by the end Miranda had been transformed into little more than a sparring partner. Or a punching bag.

"My respect is here now," Ward said after his hand was raised and on some level it is. But the idea that a win over the defensively challenged Mianda declared Ward ready for Froch or Kessler is debatable at the least and ill-founded at the worst.

That's what made Edison Miranda a difficult test for Andre Ward last Saturday night. If he stumbled against him, which he did not, it would have called his own future into question. Yet the fact that he did not still leaves open the question of just how good he is.

It is a question Ward is clearly willing to answer against anyone. That speaks to his fighter's heart and to the fact that when you are 25, undefeated and the only American Olympic gold medalist since David Reid in 1996 you are short on perspective but long on confidence. That is how it should be.

That is also where Goossen has to come in. Very likely the WBC will name Ward the mandatory challenger for Froch but that doesn't mean Froch has to fight him immediately or that Ward has no other option other than to do it.

In fact, he has several and he and Goossen should avail themselves of them. There will be time enough for Carl Froch or, hopefully, Mikkel Kessler, down the road. For now, Goossen should keep Ward on the same road he's been taking – the patient one that allowed him to develop his talents to the fullest without an as yet unnecessary final exam being thrust upon him.

Edison Miranda was a pop quiz and Ward aced it by popping Miranda in the nose all night long. It was a good night, one that brought almost 8,000 paying customers to a Bay Area arena for

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boxing for the first time in probably 20 years or more.

Andre Ward can build on that without yet taking the division's biggest risk. In fact, with the right promotion he could well come back to Oakland to fight for the WBO or IBF title (if they can kidnap Bute out of Montreal) and attract a bigger crowd and create more of a buzz around the best amateur fighter America has produced this decade.

If Andre Ward can get that out of a lopsided win over Edison Miranda he will have done well. Reaching for anything more at the moment seems a risk not worth taking because Froch and Kessler aren't likely to be going anywhere any time soon.

Now is the time to be a little patient for a little bit longer, difficult though it may be, because boxing is a mysterious craft. Mastering it is a long and difficult process that requires both hard work and careful progression. It takes time, usually more time than promoters, managers or fighters want to devote to it.

To move too quickly or too slowly can be fatal to a boxer's long-term hopes and plans. Thus far, Ward has been moved perfectly. A win over Edison Miranda should not speed up that process too much.

Being patient now will be difficult for all involved but it is essential to maximize his possibilities in the future. Ward can say all the challenging words he wants but one or two more wins over stiffer competition than Miranda, the kind represented by a Bute or a Balzsay, is the direction he should head. If he does that and wins those fights, when his night with Carl Froch or Mikkel Kessler finally does come, he'll be ready for it.

Ready not only to fight, but ready to win.