

Cus Told Him He'd Train Champions

Written by Ron Borges
Tuesday, 14 July 2009 19:00

Teddy Atlas didn't want to say yes. After all he's seen in boxing, why would he?

He has reached a point in life where he is pound-for-pound the best analyst in boxing broadcasting, a guy who can break down a fight and make the correct call with uncanny accuracy time and again. More important, in a game where dealing from the bottom of the deck is the norm he plays the cards the way they're dealt and gives you the straight story even if it's about a crook.

So what did he need to get back into the arena for? Why leave his comfort zone at ringside to go back into a place where anything can happen and most of the time it's bad?

That's what he was asking himself after the phone rang at his home on Staten Island and the handlers of undefeated Russian-born heavyweight contender Alexander Povetkin asked him to come to Moscow for 10 days to work with the IBF's mandatory contender. Just a trial run, they said. Just to take a look and see if he thought he could help a guy who is two fights away from facing Wladimir Klitschko for the heavyweight championship of the world.

That title doesn't mean as much to the world as it once did but it still means a lot to Atlas because it's a reminder. A reminder of his true calling and of how it all began up in Catskill, N.Y. when nobody knew who he was and fewer people cared.

A reminder that one guy did know, an old monk of a man named Cus D'Amato, who told Atlas when he was only 19 that "one day you will train heavyweight champions."

Not a heavyweight champion. Heavyweight champions. All these years later the 52-year-old Atlas, who trained one in Michael Moorer, could still hear those words if he listened closely enough. The more Povetkin's people talked the more Atlas heard Cus calling.

"Part of you wants to push it away but it comes up and reminds you – this is what you do," Atlas said. "You're a teacher. You're someone who can make people better.

"To be honest, it's more comfortable doing the other thing. It's more comfortable sitting at ringside talking. But ultimately I was a teacher, a trainer, first. It's never completely gone."

So he went. He went to Moscow with the intention of saying no but he went all the same, which got him halfway to yes.

Atlas went to the gym and did what he always does, clearing the place of all the hangers on and mindless cell phone users jabbering on the sidelines, bothering him when he was trying to work and not helping his fighter. He hadn't even signed on yet but almost immediately that is what Povetkin had become. He was his fighter...which, in a nutshell, is why Teddy Atlas is back in the nutty business of boxing.

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“He’s a good kid,” Atlas said of Povetkin as he scurried around New Jersey this week trying to set up a gym, find housing and a cook and a strength and conditioning coach and everything else Povetkin will need when he arrives in America for the first time to train under a guy who runs a different kind of operation than the former Olympic gold medalist was used to.

“He’s an honest kid,” Atlas said. “I like that. He admitted to me he’d become complacent. He’d gotten secure over there and started believing he had something permanent, something he owned, when he’s really just renting.

“He couldn’t push himself because he didn’t even know where to push. He’d become safe in a place where there’s no safety net. It’s hard for a kid to understand but when you feel safe in boxing you’re one fight away from being eliminated because it’s not a safe place. My job is to make sure someone doesn’t show up at midnight and take everything away from him.”

Povetkin is 17-0 with two good wins over an aging Chris Byrd and reluctant American Eddie Chambers, who lost nearly every round to Povetkin when they met in January 2008. Those were good wins but they don’t mean he’s ready for Klitschko, regardless of what the IBF ratings say.

The unified champion has nearly three times as many knockouts as Povetkin has fights and he is someone who knows who he is and what he is not inside the ring. Alexander Povetkin, in Atlas’ opinion, has no idea, which is where Atlas comes in.

This job is not simply about training a fighter and preparing a battle plan. It’s about teaching someone who he is inside a squared circle surrounded with four strands of rope. Who he is in a place where there is no exit so when his night comes, and it may come by late fall or early winter, he will be in there to do more than be able to tell his grandchildren he once fought for the heavyweight title.

“I worked with him for a week and he lost nine pounds,” Atlas said. “He’d never worked like that. We watched tape and I would stop it and show him why he got hit and you could see in his eyes he wanted to know. He wanted to KNOW. I knew right then I was going to train the guy.

“He began to realize to have a chance to compete with a guy like Klitchko he needed to get to another level. He needed to be more than he’s been. He needed to learn more. He needed to have a plan. He needed to be fitter. He needed to be more defined. He needed to have an identity in the ring, not just determination and throwing punches.

“He needs to have a definitive identity because he’s going in against a guy who does have a definitive identity. Klitschko has his weaknesses but he has his talent too. You can’t go in there without a plan.”

Or without self-knowledge and boxing knowledge, which are two things Wilfried Sauerland and Vlad Hrunov, Povetkin’s co-managers, and his promoter, Sauderland’s son Kalle, all believe Atlas can provide.

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Although Atlas has rejected opportunities in recent years to train heavyweight contender Samuel Peter and to at least audition for jobs with other top fighters, this time something made him ignore all the pitfalls and back stabbers that are so much a part of the sport's underbelly and step forward.

This time he heard D'Amato's voice as well as Hrunov's and Sauerland's and Povetkin's. In the end, maybe that's what pushed him outside his own comfort zone and back into the arena fully knowing the critics and the doubters will abound.

"There's something that made me a trainer first," said Atlas, who once handled fighters like Barry McGuigan, Donny LaLonde, Simon Brown and Chris Reid as well as Moorer and a host of fractured guys he made better than their talents seemed likely to allow before giving it all up for the relative safety of life as a television commentator. "The right situation comes along and you can't turn your back on it.

"Unless you're really finished and you're content that you've achieved enough something like this calls you. No one knows what our fates are. You have to pursue things to find out. I'll be honest with you. You get a little scared because now you're putting things on the line again and you're going to have to face days when the fighter doesn't want to cooperate and you have to make him.

"I'd left that behind. That was someone else's problem. A part of me didn't want to leave my comfort zone and deal with the tough days when a fighter is in a place of resistance. Those days are a lot more difficult than anything I face on Friday Night Fights.

"But if you're still a teacher and you see a kid who needs you, a kid whose eyes light up when you're showing him something he didn't know before, you understand you're supposed to teach this guy. There's no guarantee but maybe you're teaching a guy who is going to be world champion. Maybe. No guarantees. Maybe.

"But if you don't do it you're guaranteed you'll never have another heavyweight champion of the world. There's only so many times people call. The first day working with him was tough on me. I hadn't been doing that work for a long time. My arms were sore. My hands were sore. My back was aching. I could barely move. But I got into this little European tub, no shower curtain or nothing, and I soaked in the water and I felt as happy as I'd felt in a long time."