

Vernon Forrest: I Have This Unquenchable Thirst To Be The Best

Written by Joe Rein
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You see champions on pay-per-view; they're larger-than-life, mythic figures -- rock stars -- towering over the Vegas Strip on plasma screens. A stage so exalted, it's only a dream for work-a-day fighters.

So, I couldn't square the demigod above the Strip with the familiar loose-limbed figure in drab sweats and a bloused, white T-shirt, moving easily around a heavy bag at the Wild Card Gym in Los Angeles recently -- seemingly content with anonymity.

The more he moved, the signature grace registered: Vernon Forrest.

After working out on July 18, 2006, he agreed to talk, and settled into a chair, while sparring was going on.

Q: I've never seen you here at Wild Card. What brings you to this particular gym?

VF: Wild Card Gym is a boxer's gym. The atmosphere, the smell, it's more like a real boxing gym. When I started back training, I wanted to start in a real boxing gym and that's Wild Card Gym.

Q: OK, you're back. Will it be at welter or junior middle, and is there any difference in your approach now?

VF: If I could still make 147, I would probably fight at 147 pounds. But I probably have some of the worst eating habits of any elite athlete in the world. I'm addicted to junk food, candy, and all that stuff. One of the things that helped me be successful over the years is: I look at boxing as you have the predator and you have the prey. The guys coming up are the predators and the champions are the prey. What made me successful is that I always had a predator's mentality coming up, and even as a champion; I had the predator's mentality. Once I became a little bit comfortable, that's when I started thinking like the prey. I forget there are a whole lot of predators out there trying to get me. So the main thing I have to do now that I'm moving up is get back that predator's mentality.

Q: I look at you -- I know all of the fights that you've had -- I don't see a mark on your face, and a Ray Robinson smile. Is it technique that allows you to avoid all of that?

VF: Absolutely! People forget that boxing is the art of hitting and not getting hit. For most people, they'll see two fighters going toe-to-toe and they'll say, "That's a great fight." That's not a great fight. It's an action fight, but not a great fight. I try not to get hit as much as possible. That's the true art.

Q: Is your defense based on reflexes or making the other guy do what you want him to and setting traps?

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VF: Both. In boxing, to be a great fighter, you have to have great reflexes. But to control a fighter, you throw punches to make a fighter do what you want him to do. I'll set up a guy in the first round, just so I can get him in the fourth round. I learned that from watching old fighters like a Ray Robinson and a Henry Armstrong. When Robinson was setting a guy up, he might throw a few body shots, just so he can hit you up top with a left hook or right hand. He moves around giving you all types of mis-directions to make you think he's interested in going one way, just so he can attack you the other way. That's what I do in my technical game. Setting a guy up. Setting traps. I can pull the trigger anytime I want to.

Q: You get full extension on all of your combos -- they're not shoe shines. Did you study Robinson's technique or is it natural?

VF: Well, Ray Robinson is the greatest fighter to walk the planet, so I've drawn a lot of inspiration from Ray. I've watched a lot of his fights. I've watched a lot of his moves. Some things he did were so fantastic -- so ahead of his time. There are some moves that I can't make, but I try to emulate Ray as much as possible.

Shoe Shining is just for show. You are not going to hit a guy with a five, six, or seven-punch combination, anyway... not a real world-class fighter, at least. I learned a long time ago...to make every punch count. To me, accuracy is very important. So, I'm not going to waste my time or energy throwing a shoe-shine, because the only thing that does is get the crowd going, but stiff jab, a stiff right hand or a stiff hook does the same thing. So, I'd rather focus on stiff, accurate punches than a shoeshine combination, which won't incapacitate my opponent at all.

Q: With all your amateur and professional experience, what can a trainer teach you, and how do you know who's the right guy?

VF: That goes back to being a great trainer. The thing about trainers nowadays is: trainers don't make fighters no more. Trainers don't take a guy and raise him up from a kid and stay with that kid, trainers don't do that anymore. Trainers get guys that are already established and say, "Well I made him a champion." No! You didn't make him a champion; he was a champion when you got him. You on for the ride. When I look at trainers, I look at guy who works with a certain caliber of guys. You'll know a good trainer five or ten minutes talking with them.

Q: What is it that you see or hear?

VF: It's an instinctual thing. You just know. If I'm hitting the bag, I have a trainer watching over me and he supposed to be watching what I do and pick out the mistakes that I'm making. So, I'll hit the bag and drop my left hand on purpose just to see if he picks it up. You know what some guys will say? "Good Job, Good Work." I'm making mistakes on purpose just to see if he'll pick it up. So, little things like. Some trainers are trainers. Some trainers are motivators. Some trainers are just good for television.

Q: Who's impressed you as a trainer?

VF: I like Emanuel Steward. He'll stick around on the ups and downs with guys. When you have

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guys like that, they are certified. They get the USDA stamp of approval. Buddy McGirt is one of the hottest trainers out there... and he's hot for a reason. You don't see Buddy taking guys from nothing and making them into something. But, he's taken the guys that might have slipped a little bit and put them back on the elite level again. I'd say Buddy is a great trainer. But for some reason, I've always been partial to the older guys. Trainers that have been around and have seen the different eras of boxing. Me, personally, I always like those types of guys. I admired guys like Eddie Futch. You can't put a dollar figure on experience. Boxing has evolved, and you have to keep up with the times. But I'd love to have someone like that in my corner.

Q: What drives you?

VF: They say champions are born and not made. I believe there is some truth in that. For me, I have this unquenchable thirst to be the best at what I do... to not to have someone say that they were better than me. So, if I get hit, I don't want to go down and give this guy the satisfaction of knowing that he put me down. I don't want to lose... to give a guy the satisfaction to say that he beat me. So that's the thing that drives me. That's the thing that's going to make me become champion again. That's the drive that's going to make me fight Mayorga again, and all of the best fighters out there in my weight class and beat those guys.

Q: You brought it up. You mentioned Mayorga. What happened in those fights?

VF: The first time, it was just errors on my part. I really didn't think this guy could be in the ring with me. At that time, I had the prey's mentality, as opposed to the predator's. The second time, I thought I won and I didn't get the decision.

Q: You have the reputation as a puncher and you landed solidly on Mayorga. Why couldn't you dent him? You even landed a combination when he stuck out his chin, with his hands down.

VF: I was punching hard but I wasn't punching with leverage. I was throwing anger shots. You have to remember, in boxing you don't have to hit a person hard to knock him out, you just have to hit him accurately. I was throwing hard shots, but it was not really accurate. He was able to brace himself. He could see the intention in my face when I was about to throw a punch. So, as a fighter, you just brace for it. The shots that get you are the shots you don't see. I think that's the reason he was able to stand up to my punches, because I was throwing a lot of hard shots, not boxing shots, just hard, angry shots.

Q: Who are you working with, management wise?

VF: With the help of HBO, I was able to get the marquee fights and make a substantial amount of money in the process. Once I learned the business, and I reached a certain stature, I didn't want to have the typical manager. I want to control my own career. If I make a mistake, I can live with that. So I created my own management and promotional company.

I'm not like Oscar De La Hoya, where my promotional company is pushed out there in the spotlight. Plus... he doesn't fight under his own promotional banner; he fights under the Top Rank banner. I fight under my own banner. My company is not out in the front, but when it's

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time to get paid, TRUST ME, my company handles all of the financial aspects.

Q: Time is precious. How much longer will you give this?

VF: I'm going to put in, like, three more years. I was really on the tail end of retiring, but I wanted to make sure my legacy was intact. So, when I walk away from the sport, I can truly walk away. I think it will take three more years for me to do everything I want to do.

*this Q n A originally ran on Fightbeat.com, thanks Carlos