Andre Ward is one polarizing guy. There are supporters who are absolutely convinced that he's a shoo-in to win Showtime's Super Six tournament. They point to his Olympic gold medal and his fairly trouble-free climb to the near top of the current super middleweight ladder. They assert that he'll box circles around Mikkel Kessler, Arthur Abraham, and Carl Froch, and that he's a more developed fighter than his closest stylistic counterpart in the tournament, Andre Dirrell. It's easy to see their point: Ward is very comfortable in the ring; he's got fast hands, moves well, and, when the he shows up as if he's interested in the outcome of the fight, he can get off explosively.

His detractors always bring up his intermittent tendency to push his punches, his trouble establishing proper distance, and his general complacency and lack of focus. In a sport where the requirements for being a top pro and a top amateur have grown increasingly dissimilar, he's thought of by some as a good amateur in a pro's game.

So people are either really high on Ward or totally dismissive of him.

There are a lot of interesting questions that will be answered after Andre takes on Mikkel Kessler late next month. Will Ward's speed and movement befuddle his opponent all night? Will Kessler pursue Ward in a straight line, only to get picked apart? Does Ward have enough power to hurt Kessler or enough physical strength to hold him off and keep him a step behind? Because Kessler is strickly a headhunter, will he play right into Ward's hands by trying to sharp-shoot with him?

Maybe more importantly, if Kessler, who is a very aggressive fighter, is able to reach him, we'll find out what happens when it's gut check time for Ward. He's been down once before, in his ninth fight against Darnell Boone, and didn't let the experience unravel him. But Boone was a 6-2-1 clubfighter with very little power. Kessler is a good finisher with a sharp instinct for spotting an opponent's distress. And unlike a lot of Western European champions, he hasn't been fed a steady diet of stiffs, been awarded gift decisions, or been the beneficiary of a flexible reading of the rules of boxing. No, Kessler has come by every win honestly; he's a real fighter.

On paper Andre Ward comes out of this tournament very well. He's the most technically well rounded of the contestants in it. Aside from the intense but supremely self-confident Abraham, no one else among the group controls pace nearly as successfully. One of the things I'm looking forward to discovering is whether Ward will force Abraham out of his own leisurely pace or whether over time he himself will be worn down by Abraham's deliberate and constant pressure. I think that if Ward is mentally tough enough, he'll be able to give Abraham some difficulties.

There are still some things about Ward that bother me though. I admit to being troubled by his bad habit of looking at the canvas when he flicks out his jab. It's a careless and potentially dangerous mistake to make. He's not a good inside fighter yet either. That's not saying he becomes uneasy on the inside, since he often moves there voluntarily, but that he doesn't know

how to work once he's there. His inclination is to grab and hold, then to throw quick and inefficient head punches. I haven't seen him being muscled around in close, so I'm not sure why he doesn't dig shots to the body while his hands are free. However, I don't expect this issue to be a factor in the Kessler fight. Mikkel isn't an inside fighter. And Andre benefits from using as much of the ring as he can anyway. Kessler's footwork, though efficient, is rudimentary compared to Ward's. The more Andre uses his legs, the better off he'll be.

I'm willing to sign off on Abraham and Kessler as bona fide and tested at the top. I'm not won over by Dirrell at all, and think that Ward is clearly the further along of the two. In spite of hearing arguments to the contrary, it seems to me that Froch is a weak link, capable of being out-toughed and outpunched by Abraham and Kessler and outboxed and maybe even outgunned by Ward.

Ultimately, Andre Ward's success in this tournament is going to come down to how well he has adjusted to the pros and how he will fare when he takes on guys who are championship or near-championship level fighters. I'm not blind to his natural ability, but sense a certain unformed quality in him. American Olympians have been horrible underachievers in recent years, largely because they've been too pampered and are too soft. I've still got some reservations about Ward's capacity to dig down in tough fights. By the time the Super Six tournament has been completed, questions about those reservations will all be answered.

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