

From Belarus To Vegas, Yuri Foreman's Path Leads To Title Shot

Written by Robert Mladinich
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As the longtime owner of the fabled Gleason's Gym in Brooklyn, New York, Bruce Silverglade has seen no shortage of pretenders and contenders walk through his doors over the years. So many of them initially boast of having vast ring experience, but once they step into the ring it is obvious that they were not entirely truthful.

When the penniless Yuri Foreman entered the gym a decade ago, he told Silverglade that he had traveled from his native Belarus in the former Soviet Union to Haifa, Israel, and then onto New York to fulfill the promise he had made to himself years before to become a professional boxer.

Once Foreman entered the ring and more than held his own against several more experienced opponents, Silverglade realized that Foreman was something special. He did not charge him monthly dues and helped him with several employment opportunities. In the early days, Foreman sustained himself by working in the Garment District or as a waiter while training at night.

Silverglade watched his steady progression, as Foreman, now 29, won a coveted New York City Golden Gloves title and never wavered in his obsession to make the most of his immense natural abilities and work ethic.

"He's the most self-motivated fighter I ever met," said Silverglade. "It's rare to see anyone work as hard as he does. On any given day, I think he could go 30 rounds and not be winded at the end."

With Silverglade serving as his advisor, Foreman turned pro in January 2002. Not known as a big puncher, Foreman waltzed through most of his early opponents and his record now stands at 27-0 (8 KOS).

His last fight, in June 2009, against Cornelius "K-9" Bundrage, who was featured on "The Contender" reality show, was declared a no-contest in the third round when Foreman could not continue due to an unintentional head butt.

Silverglade will head to Las Vegas on Thursday, November 12, because two days later, as part of the televised pay-per-view undercard of the epic battle between Manny Pacquiao and Miguel Cotto, Foreman will challenge WBA junior middleweight champion Daniel Santos, 32-3-1 (27 KOS), a rugged native of Puerto Rico who has scored impressive knockouts in his last two title fights.

"I'll be like an expectant father on Saturday," joked Silverglade. "I met Yuri when he first came to New York and had nothing but a lot of desire and determination. He was still a teenager, but had traveled halfway around the world with the sole intention of training at Gleason's and fighting professionally."

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Silverglade has seen an abundance of changes in Foreman over the years, the biggest of which is the keen interest he has developed in his rabbinical studies. Foreman and his wife, filmmaker Leyla Leidecker, whom he met in New York, have become very religious and Foreman is as immersed in becoming a champion as he is in becoming a rabbi once his fighting days are over.

"I get strength from my faith, as well as the long road I've taken in three different countries," said Foreman. "All of the hardship in Russia, Israel, and here in the United States gives me the burst (enthusiasm and encouragement) I need."

When documentarian Joe DiMaggio was scouting subjects for his soon to be completed film "In This Corner.....", Foreman stuck out as a natural subject. The other four subjects are junior middleweight James Moore, an Irish immigrant who also fought out of Gleason's and lost a decision to Foreman in December 2008, Delon Parsley, who is 1-0 (1 KO) as a professional junior middleweight, 13-year-old boxer Khalid Twiti, and trainer Harry Keitt.

"Very few fighters understand the art of boxing the way that Yuri does," said DiMaggio, a longtime photographer who covered scores of boxing events for Sports Illustrated. "With Yuri, you're not going to see a lot of throwing and catching of leather, but you're going to witness the sweet science of boxing which many people think is a lost art."

What makes Foreman even more interesting to DiMaggio as a film subject is the fighter's mass of contradictions.

"The violence of pro boxing combined with the spirituality associated with his rabbinical studies make him a perfect protagonist," said DiMaggio. "He is a very compelling subject."

Manhattan restaurateur Murray Wilson, the proprietor of popular New York eateries Campagnola and Ecco, was equally impressed when he became involved with Foreman about six years ago after first reading about him in the New York Times.

The first thing he noted was that Foreman was Jewish, which is an anachronism in boxing circles these days. After meeting him, what stood out most was the fact that he was "a sweet kid and a great fighter" who reminded Wilson of the immortal Willie Pep.

Although Wilson was relatively calm in the days before the Santos fight, Silverglade said that he and the manager will both be on an emotional roller coaster as the fight draws near.

Over the years Foreman has sparred with such high echelon fighters as Zab Judah, Arturo Gatti, Kevin Kelley, Junior Jones, Regilio Tuur and Tom "Boom Boom" Johnson. The fact that his face is still boyishly handsome and unmarked is a testament to his defensive abilities.

Against Santos, however, it is a given that he will not have an easy night. The 34-year-old southpaw won a bronze medal for Puerto Rico at the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta, and as a pro he is a three-time champion who has defeated such championship caliber opponents as Giovanni Parisi, Luis "Yory Boy" Campas, Antonio Margarito (by technical decision due to head

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butt), Jose Antonio Rivera and Joachim Alcine.

His promoter, Don King, has emphatically stated that should Santos beat Foreman, his future could have no bounds.

“Danny just needs to put it all together right here, right now,” said the wild-haired promoter. “Opportunities await him if he can answer the call of greatness, and he has an appointment on Saturday in Las Vegas.”

“I want to shine on the big stage,” said Santos. “Saturday night is my chance to fulfill the truly great promise of my boxing career. With a great performance, I will show that I belong in the biggest and best matches that can be made. I truly feel that my time has come to move into the spotlight.”

Santos has already proven himself in the ring on many occasions. But against Foreman he will be fighting an opponent, whose deceptively low knockout percentage belies a fierce hunger and a dogged determination that will make him a hard man to dissuade.

“I don’t punch light enough for my opponents to ignore it when it lands on their faces,” said Foreman. “I have fought good opponents, and they have all been aware of my power.”

Whether or not there is a knockout on Saturday is irrelevant to Silverglade, who can’t contain his excitement over seeing another overseas fighter bring his lofty dreams to fruition through years of hard work at his fabled fight factory, which is located directly under the Brooklyn Bridge.

“Yuri is a caring person and a great fighter,” said Silverglade. “He’s fast and elusive and he knows how to win. Yuri is a winner, and you’d have to be a fool to try and change a winner.”