

Kings Gym's 300 Members All Know Ward Will Beat Kessler

Written by Robert Mladinich
Monday, 16 November 2009 19:00

The San Francisco Bay Area was once a great fight town with no shortage of gritty gyms. Today, however, the only one that remains is Kings Gym, a 5,500 square foot facility in East Oakland that is both gloriously unpretentious and old-fashioned.

Although the gym currently has about 300 members, including many pros, amateurs and white collar warriors, it is best known as the home of local hero Andre Ward, 25, who has trained at Kings for his entire amateur and pro career.

Even while traveling around the world with various United States teams, Ward's heart was always with his hometown gym. On the wall are postcards he has sent from the furthest corners of the globe.

"The gym is old-school, and I don't ever plan on changing it," said owner Charles A. King, a retired railroad engineer. "We might not be the biggest, but we're the best by far. You won't see any red carpets, and our trainers will tell you the truth. If you want to learn how to box, regardless of your age or condition, this is the place to be. You're not going to get hurt, and you're going to learn according to your own personal timetable."

Over the years area pros like Jauquin Gallardo, "Irish" Pat Lawlor, Andy Nance, Paul Nave, and Tommy Evans were as much at home at Kings as such visiting luminaries as George Foreman, James "Bonecrusher" Smith and Marvis Frazier.

But no fighter has had as much of a positive impact on the gym as Ward, the 2004 Olympic gold medalist whose 20-0 (13 KOS) record will be on the line when he challenges WBA super middleweight champion Mikkel "Viking Warrior" Kessler, 42-1 (32 KOS), of Denmark on Saturday, November 21, at Oakland's Oracle Arena.

Their 12 round bout will be part of Showtime's Super Six World Boxing Classic, and most aficionados are expecting it to live up to its advance billing as a barnburner.

"I'll say this, Kessler is a great fighter with a great record and a lot of well-deserved respect," said King, who has known Ward since the youngster, not yet 10, visited the gym with his late father and brother, both of whom seemed a lot more interested in boxing than Andre did.

"Not to take anything away from Kessler, but Andre is going to win this fight. He is the chosen one."

The deeply religious Ward calls himself S.O.G., which stands for Son of God. Whether or not his faith can get him past someone as tough, talented and durable as Kessler is yet to be determined, but you can bet that King, along with all of the gym members, will be rooting for him loudly and proudly.

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“Andre grew up in this gym, so he’s like family,” said King. “We all love him, and he loves us. We know how hard he works, and what he can do.”

On Monday, November 16, the gym hosted a media day. Both fighters worked out and held court with the press, which came from as far away as the East Coast and even Europe. Not surprisingly, the fighters were respectful, even deferential, when assessing each other’s skills, but it was obvious that their competitive juices were flowing.

Ward’s behavior and demeanor is in keeping with the lessons that were subtly imparted on him as a young and impressionable boy during his formative years at Kings. Perhaps those lessons can be best put in perspective by a middle-aged man whose first foray to Kings several years ago was done with more than a bit of apprehension about what he’d encounter there.

While on a trip to New York, Oakland business owner Jim Scalise had taken a boxing class and – exhilarated - wanted to recreate the experience in the Bay Area. Although he didn’t know a fish hook from a left hook (as colorful journalist Mike Marley describes boxing greenhorns), he sought out Kings where he eventually trained for fitness with Frank Guzman, the nephew of former light heavyweight contender Alvaro “Yaqui” Lopez.

“Charles King says he doesn’t roll out the red carpet for anyone, but he sure does in a figurative sense,” said Scalise. “Anyone that walks through the doors is treated like a longtime member. Everyone there was so nice and welcoming to me. If you have any negative preconceptions about boxing, and the people who inhabit the sport, a trip to Kings will give you a whole new perspective.”

It was in this environment that Ward was molded into both the great fighter and the warm human being that he is. King remembers him first coming to the gym as part of the Black Hawks Club, a local sports league that exposed inner city youngsters to different kinds of athletic activities.

In the beginning, all the young Ward did was sit on a bench and watch his older brother and late father work out. When Ward’s father passed away while he was still in his forties, the devastated youngster was taken under the wing of Virgil Hunter, who trains him to this day.

“Virgil took Andre home with him, and treated him like a son,” said King. “Virgil is a very spiritual person, and he instilled that faith in Andre. Together, things really took off from there.”

Before he was even a teenager, the once shy, quiet and introspective Ward won the Silver Gloves and, according to King, “things really started happening.”

While lots of people were surprised that Ward made the Olympic team that competed in Athens in 2004, nobody at Kings was surprised at all. Nor were they taken aback when he emerged from the Games as the lone United States gold medalist.

“We have known Andre since he was a baby, and have seen him just get better and better,” said King. “When he came home with the gold, we couldn’t have been happier or prouder. But

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surprised? Not in the least.”

Nor will King be surprised when (not if) Ward soundly beats Kessler on Saturday night before thousands of adoring hometown fans. As King sees it, the fight, as well as Ward’s clean-cut reputation, couldn’t come at a better time for Oakland, a once thriving city that now has a reputation for lawlessness and social decay.

It is hard to shake that image, especially after four police officers were shot and killed by a parolee in one particularly disturbing incident earlier this year.

“Having Andre as a representative of Oakland, and Kings Gym, is a real blessing,” said King. “This is his home. He’s a hard worker, humble, honest and down to earth. His humility will fool you. If you didn’t know him, but met him for the first time, you’d never think he was a world champion or a gold medalist.

“Don’t expect anything to change after he beats Kessler,” King continued. “He’ll be a world champion, but he’ll still be Andre.”

Kings Gym is located at 843 35th Avenue, Oakland, California 94601, phone 510-261-2199. Contact Charles King or his lovely wife Celeste by e-mail at: kingsgym4@aol.com

Readers, here's a little background on boxing in Oakland, provided by Showtime PR...

FORTY-TWO YEARS HAVE PASSED SINCE LAST WORLD TITLE FIGHT IN OAKLAND

□

**Curtis Cokes Beat Charlie Shipes On Oct. 2, 1967,
In the Last World Title Fight Held in Oakland;**

**WBA Super Middleweight World Championship
□ Super Six World Boxing Classic - Group Stage 1
MIKKEL KESSLER Vs. ANDRE WARD
Saturday, Nov. 21 From Oracle Arena, Oakland
Live on SHOWTIME® at 10p.m. ET/PT**

NEW YORK (Nov. 17, 2009)—Forty-two years have passed since the last world championship fight occurred in Oakland, a tradition-rich boxing city that calls one of the world’s top super middleweights Andre “S.O.G.” Ward their own.

“Oakland has a pretty storied history of boxing, mostly in the pre- to post-war era,” says Monte Poole, a longtime columnist for the Oakland Tribune who has covered boxing in Oakland for 25 years. “I would venture to say you would find dozens of world title fights between the 1920s and the 1960s. We have had some good fighters come out of Oakland, but I have to say Andre Ward has got to be considered the best.”

The 2004 Olympic Gold medal winning Ward will try to take away Mikkel “Viking Warrior”

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Kessler's World Boxing Association (WBA) 168-pound title come Saturday night in the final Group Stage 1 matchup of SHOWTIME Sports Super Six World Boxing Classic, this Saturday, Nov. 21, at the Oracle Arena in Oakland, Calif. (live on SHOWTIME® at 10 p.m. ET/PT, delayed on the west coast).

You'd have to go all the way back to the evening of Oct. 10, 1967, for the last time a world title fight was held in Oakland. On that night at Oracle Arena, then known as the Oakland Arena, WBA and WBC welterweight world champion Curtis Cokes from Dallas, Texas, beat Mississippi-born Charlie Shipes of Oakland with an eight-round knockout after flooring him three other times during the fight.

"What I remember about that night was we had a tremendous rainstorm," says Oakland's Henry Winston, who happened to be promoting his first-ever fight that night. "We had a good crowd and a good show. We had all the big New York media there that night. It was the night New York came to Oakland. I remember Cokes beating Shipes pretty bad. Curtis had a right hand that was atrocious. It was a very smart punch and once he had it perfected Shipes had no chance because he was a come-in type challenger."

Cokes, who was inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame in 2003, would fight again in Oakland the following year having moved up to the middleweight division. He beat Jimmy Lester by unanimous decision at the Oakland Auditorium. Both he and Shipes currently reside in Texas.

Winston, who will be in attendance for Ward-Kessler on Saturday night, said the Cokes-Shipes was his first and last world title promotion. "I did some more fights but they weren't world title fights," he said. "I did some at the Oakland Auditorium."

Winston promoted George Foreman's first amateur loss in the Oakland Auditorium and worked with Foreman from his start until his comeback while teaming with Shipes, who trained Foreman. He also worked a little with another pretty famous fighter. "I tried to get Muhammad Ali to come to Oakland but it never did happen," Winston said. "I was promised once that if Ali ever fought in California that he would fight for my promotion but he never did. He went to San Diego and got beat pretty bad by Kenny Norton."

Poole said he can tell there is a buzz around the city for Oakland's return to boxing glory. "I sense it, yeah. Andre's last fight here (against Edison Miranda in May) I didn't see it until three or four days before the fight. I think next week when the hype machine gets full blast you'll start feeling more of a buzz and electricity and just people getting into it."

He added: "I think there are great fighters that have come out of Oakland proper but I think you would have to go back 30, 40, 50 years to find most of them."

One of those great Oakland fighters was Johnny Gonsalves, a 1950s contender who never got a shot at a world title. Gonsalves, who died in 2007, had a record of 57-21-3 as a pro before retiring in 1962. He was inducted into the World Boxing Hall of Fame in 1995. A favorite for the U.S. Olympic team in 1948, he was beaten in the semifinals of the trials by Wallace Smith, who

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won a gold medal.

The following story was reported in Gonsalves' obituary in the San Francisco Chronicle. According to former amateur welterweight Ted Such, who later owned a bar with Gonsalves in San Leandro, Rocky Marciano, the only undefeated/untied heavyweight champion in boxing history, once walked into the bar and announced, "I can beat anybody in this bar -- but Johnny Gonsalves."

Saturday night against Mikkell Kessler, Andre Ward hopes to write his own bit of Oakland boxing history.