

Today We Will See How Ward Handles The Moment

Written by Ron Borges

Thursday, 19 November 2009 19:00

America's best chance for a super upset in SHOWTIME's Super Six 168-pound tournament comes tonight in Oakland, when former Olympic gold medalist Andre Ward faces the greatest challenge of his career, super middleweight champion Mikkel Kessler. Kessler is the favorite and he should be but that does not mean Ward is not a live underdog.

He is, in fact, more than that. He's an underdog with bite who is fighting in his hometown in front of an enthusiastic crowd that seem sure to lift him to as inspired a performance as he can muster against someone who has more than twice as many fights and nearly twice as many knockouts as Ward has prize fights.

"This is what it's all about," Ward (20-0, 13 KO) said this week. "I've been at the highest level as an amateur and now I'm preparing for my first world title fight as a professional. I see all you (media) guys and I know what a big fight is all about. I'm ready.

"It's incredible to have this fight at home. A lot of people say that boxing is dead in Oakland. There used to be two or three gyms full of boxers here. Boxing was a huge thing. To see that excitement for this fight here in Oakland and in the Bay Area and to give them something positive to support, I'm excited about that.

"As the fight gets closer, I draw into myself more. I envision what it would feel like to leave the arena with the belt and what it would feel like to leave without the belt. I'm doing everything I can to leave the Oracle Arena with the WBA strap on Saturday night."

For that to happen Ward will have to fight better than he ever has because Kessler (42-1, 32 KO) is the best super middleweight in the world. His only loss came to Joe Calzaghe two years ago, at a time when Kessler simply lacked the experience to handle a fighter as slick and sly as Calzaghe. Although the stronger puncher, Kessler was slowly tied into knots by Calzaghe, never able to extricate himself.

But he learned from that fight and will enter this one in the position Calzaghe was then. He is the more experienced man and the stronger man, mentally as well as physically. In a fight of this magnitude those things loom more important than who punches hardest or moves best.

The real issue is who can handle the moment? There is no question Kessler can because he has. But can Ward, who is the only remaining American in the tournament who has not been beaten?

"We've had a game plan for the past nine weeks," Ward said. "We have a general plan but at the end of the day, it's going to be about getting in there and being myself, being Andre Ward. The days that you go in there and try to be perfect are usually your worst days. The days you go in there and say I'm going to have fun and do what I do are generally your best."

Today We Will See How Ward Handles The Moment

Written by Ron Borges

Thursday, 19 November 2009 19:00

Ward is right about that but Kessler will do all he can – which is considerable – to make him uncomfortable. Calzaghe did the same to him after a slow start in which Kessler hurt him early. He weathered that storm however and slowly began to undress Kessler, forcing him into mistakes and finally to the point where his confidence in himself and his plan began to wane.

Kessler will try to do the same to Ward, whose lack of experience in such matters as this will be something he has to overcome. Every young fighter faces such a moment. This is his and no one can be sure what he will do with it.

“He reminds me a lot of myself when I was his age,” Kessler said. “I won my first world title at 24 but I’m more experienced in a lot of different ways. I can see that he is hungry, has good speed and good technique. He’s a good fighter but I think my strengths are also speed and my experience. I have double the fights he has and I have had a lot of big fights.

“You can pick things up from all kinds of bouts. We all have different skills. I’m not the kind of guy who watches tape. I watched some of his fights a couple times and we talked about it. I’m well prepared.”

Ward believes he is as well. They all do when they are young and undefeated and have no idea yet what it is like to face someone with the skill and experience of a Kessler. To this point, Ward’s biggest name opponent was the wild-swinging Edison Miranda, who he easily outpointed in May. Miranda came to the Oracle believing he would overwhelm a young kid still wet behind the ears and unlikely to be able to stand up to his power. By the time he left, he had different thoughts and Ward is hoping Kessler will leave thinking the same way about him.

“People are often surprised when they fight me,” Ward said. “You see one thing and get in the ring and see something different. Miranda told me in the locker room after the fight that he thought I would be a lot easier than I was. I’ve heard that a lot during my career, even going back to the amateurs.

“I have no idea what it is about my style, but they would hear I was the No. 1 guy and see me fight and say ‘That’s Ward?’ I do it in such a way that it looks easy until they get in the ring with me. Miranda hit me more than I would have liked but I responded and came right back. Who has hit Mikkel Kessler clean? Who has really caught him so we could see what his chin is really like?”

Ward didn’t say it but he believes he will. Time will tell about that but anyone who followed Ward’s amateur career realizes few people expected him to win the only American gold medal in Athens in 2004. He came through then with quiet determination and faith in himself and powers larger than himself. Those are feelings he will carry with him into the ring at Oracle Arena. After that, we will see if the student is equal to the test.

“On his path to gold, no one gave him a shot, everyone else was the favorite,” said Ward’s promoter, Dan Goossen. “This is the same situation. They are all picking Kessler and for good reason -- he’s a great, experienced champion. But we have all the confidence in the world that Saturday night will make history. Experience is great against someone who hasn’t experienced

Today We Will See How Ward Handles The Moment

Written by Ron Borges

Thursday, 19 November 2009 19:00

everything Andre learned at the Olympics.”

Even Kessler’s promoter, Germany’s Wilfried Sauerland, conceded Ward is the best of the three Americans in the tournament and someone that even as experienced a champion as Kessler must be wary of because, frankly, in a situation like this you never know what you don’t know.

“For me there are three favorites to win the Super Six World Boxing Classic – Mikkel Kessler, Arthur Abraham, and Andre Ward,” Sauerland said. “Obviously, Ward has the tremendous advantage of fighting at home – that is a big help.

“His Olympic gold medal as well as his professional record speak volumes about his class. He is certainly a very special fighter but one does not know where his boundaries are. He has never been tested and he has never fought someone like Mikkel. Saturday will be Ward’s first big test.”

True enough. Every fighter must have one and no one can know until the test is administered how he will perform. But if he performs as he has in the past, Mikkel Kessler may face a long trip back to Denmark one belt short of what he had when he arrived in California.