The holidays are here and Andre Ward started the festivities early. He got a golden belt from Denmark when he dominated Mikkel Kessler last month in Oakland, CA to win the WBA Super Middleweight championship.

But instead of gloating on the victory, Ward and the rest of his camp refuse to be complacent. The man spitting wisdom in the newly crowned champion's ear, counseling against excessive self pride, is Virgil Hunter.

Ward's long time mentor and godfather has garnered recognition as one of the more respected up 'n coming trainers in boxing. And anyone that knows Hunter will tell you that he never hesitates to speak his mind.

Hunter has high hopes for his prized protégé, including becoming a champion in multiple weight divisions. According to Hunter, the capacity of Andre Ward's ability is nowhere near its peak.

"I think Andre is at 60% of what he is capable of. And he is a champion. Most fighters that become champion for the first time do not have much room for growth. But there is so much more canvas to build on with Andre."

How is he sure?

"Andre only has twenty one fights. Who did Kessler fight in his 21st fight? Who did Pavlik fight in his 21st fight? Who did Calzaghe fight in his 21st fight? It is hard to answer. Andre has been fighting high caliber fighters for years but people do not give him credit for it. Anytime Andre has been in there when the money is on the line, he has won, convincingly. He has never had to win a close fight."

Hunter went further to profess his ultimate goal for Andre Ward.

"By 32 years old, Andre Ward will be heavyweight champion of the world," says the confident trainer. "He has always beaten guys bigger than him, even in the amateurs. If Andre gets to 200 pounds naturally and maybe grows an inch taller, he could become heavyweight champion absolutely."

To put it lightly, the heavyweight division has had its better days. With the average 215 pound fighter getting massively outweighed by the Klitschkos, Valuev, and Arreolas of the world, there are some boxing insiders that feel like there should be a super heavyweight division in order to balance the landscape. However Hunter sees it differently. He believes that some of the massive heavyweights are only doing a disservice to themselves because they do not train to maximize their potential.

"I believe in the prototype heavyweight, the Joe Louis type, 6'3 or 6'4, 210, 215 pounds. If a

heavyweight could fight at that weight, that is enough to beat any 6’7, 240 pound fighter out there. I think that heavyweights should all get their body fat measured and have an expert analyze their best fighting weight. You see, the extra weight is causing them to lay their punches in, instead of snapping the punches in. There is no weight limit on a basketball player, but each one of them knows that there is a weight for them to be their best at.

“Chris Arreola is a great example. I believe in Chris’s ability to be heavyweight champ. If he can get his weight under control, I think that he has the ability to beat any heavyweight out there. He used to box at a lighter weight in the amateurs and that means something.

“I am trying to inspire him. I think that if he got the weight under control and really disciplined himself, he could be a champion. He should be a champion because he has the skills.”

Get close enough to Virgil Hunter and you could about boxing for hours. The man has a passion for watching classic fight tapes. Yet, as much as Hunter knows about boxing, he is still considers himself a student of the game. He especially enjoys learning the evolution of Hispanic boxing. From the rugged boxing style of Carlos Palomino to the boxing technique of Salvador Sanchez, Hunter thinks that the progressions of hispanic fighters are a thing to behold.

“I am a connoisseur of Hispanic fighters. I study Hispanic fighters more than any other nationality. The Hispanic fighters in particular are a culture of evolution. In the past, there was one way that was required of you (Hispanics) to fight, and that was for blood and guts. Then Salvador Sanchez came along. He was one of the first Hispanic fighters that could move, slide, and counter. Then when Chavez came along, he had ingredients of a lot of greats in the past. He had a little bit of Sanchez in him, as well.

“Now you see the influence of the African American fight philosophy in the Hispanic fighters, and vice versa. Look at Juan Diaz, Timothy Bradley’s trainer; he is doing a hell of a job.”

Ward’s recent win over Kessler has given Hunter some much deserved recognition as an elite trainer. The victory shocked most. But all Hunter could say is I told you so.

“Every one was talking about Kessler’s power. And to the untrained eye, what Andre does in the ring seems like finesse. But there was no way in the world that Kessler is stronger than Andre, and it showed.”

Although Ward and Hunter are proud of their recent achievement, they refuse to take anyone lightly, especially potential opponent Jermain Taylor. After getting knocked out for the third time in five fights in October against Arthur Abraham, many in boxing expected Taylor to withdraw from the Super Six tournament and announce his retirement.

Meanwhile Lou DiBella, Taylor’s long time promoter, and friend, stated last week that he refuses to be involved in Taylor fights any further because of his desire to go on fighting. Ozell Nelson, Taylor’s trainer, recently said that Jermain is staying in the tournament. Despite all of the uncertainty, Hunter says that they will not play a waiting game.

“Taylor is extremely dangerous without a doubt. We do not overlook him by any means. No sir,” said Hunter. “He has everything to gain. They talk all that mess about him (Taylor) being washed up. But he has a belt to go after. This is a serious fight. We are not going to underestimate him because there is too much at stake. I think he is banking on the fact that maybe Andre does not punch as hard as Abraham or Froch,” Hunter said.

“You know, Taylor was winning that fight against Froch. And he was doing very well against Abraham. We are already starting the mental preparations for Jermain Taylor, fighting a guy that other people want to write off. We are not writing him off. Taylor is in the right spot, fighting for a world title.”

The Super Six Tournament has captured the attention of the boxing world. But Hunter thinks that some of the fighters in the tourney are becoming a bit too friendly with one another before they get it on. When asked about a press release before the Kessler/Ward fight that printed Carl Froch’s prediction that Kessler was going to defeat Ward, Hunter was rather curious about Carl Froch’s kind gestures towards the Danish fighter.

“I thought it was amusing that Carl Froch is trying to compare himself to Kessler before he is getting ready to fight him. Froch said that they were the same breed, no nonsense, get straight to the point type of fighters, they like fast motorcycles, they have a lot of things in common, and have each others' phone numbers, things like that.

“I feel like Kessler is going to take his belt. I think Kessler is going to win and Froch is looking for an out. Froch is implying that the only one that could take his belt is a man that is just like him, playing the friendship angle. He is trying to side up with Kessler. I do not mean any disrespect towards any man because that is not right. But you have to stand alone in this tournament.”

To further prove his point, Hunter compared Froch and Kessler’s “friendship” to the close relationship Andre Ward and Andre Dirrell have had for over a decade.

“The only guys in this tournament that are true friends are Andre Dirrell and Andre Ward. They came up together in the amateurs. Dirrell’s grandfather and I have been friends for years. So it is a different situation. Froch and Kessler did not come up together. Kessler is in Copenhagen and Froch is from England.”

Ward’s victory over Kessler has prompted many to place him as the best fighter in the 168 pound weight class, and a favorite to win the Super Six Tournament. However, Hunter senses much more to prove for the rising star.

“I don’t rate Andre as the top Super Middleweight. I rate Froch, Abraham, Dirrell, Taylor, and Bute ahead of Andre. They were champions before he was. And the only way I would rate Andre ahead of those guys is if he beats them. I am not going to rate him above anybody that he has not beaten. So to me, they are above him. I think Dirrell and Abraham and tied for number one in the division, Froch number two, Bute is third and Taylor is fourth. I also got Allan Green above Andre. I only rate Andre above who he has fought. Like I said, he is only at 60% of

his potential. And that is the beauty of it man, we have a lot to work with."

Opponents have been questioning Ward's ability and licking their chops to put a blemish on his record since he won the gold medal in the 2004 Olympics. But they have found little like luck so far. Now that he is a champion, there will be even more potential combatants wanting to take the title out of his hands. However, Hunter says that he is ready to unleash a plan to counterpunch the critics with a shocking blow.

"I have already told people, that when Andre becomes champion there will be very few people that go the distance with him. You know, I listen to people talk about his punching power, but I think that he can hit just as hard as anybody out there, and they (the critics) don't know that. Now that he is a champ, and you include that extra twenty five to thirty percent of confidence, I am going to start calling for the knockout. You see, I never used to call for it before. But believe me he could knock out anybody out there. And he could hit as hard as anybody out there. But the critics don't believe that. They will believe that when it starts happening.

"We are getting ready to unveil something, and they don't even know what's happening. Ain't that funny...? Ward is a fighter that nobody knows about. They can't predict him. They can't put a finger on him. They don't even know what to say."

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