

Teddy Atlas Teaches, "Sasha" Povetkin Learns

Written by Adam Berlin

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Alexander Povetkin is standing across from Teddy Atlas, mirroring his trainer's moves.

Atlas stretches his arms. Povetkin stretches his arms. Atlas bends from the waist. Povetkin bends from the waist. It's a crowded day at the Middletown Boxing Club in New Jersey, about forty miles south of Manhattan on Route 35, and while the featured fighter and his trainer do their pre-sparring warm-ups in the raised ring, there is movement three steps below at ground level. The day's sparring partners are wrapping their hands, the fitness trainer is setting up a camera to tape the day's work, the assistant trainer is doing his prep, laying out the gloves, kindly passing around bottled water, and the spectators, friends and fans, are milling about, catching up, talking boxing. Soon the sparring will begin and then the sounds will become more focused. The heavy breaths of the fighters, the thudding and thumping of gloved fists against skin and bone, the voices of trainers yelling instructions. Then everyone else in the gym will gather ringside to watch closely and carefully and quietly in order to gauge the progress of this camp's star attraction, an Olympic gold-medalist nicknamed Sasha, who has compiled a professional record of 20-0 (15 KOs) and who, when he's ready, and he'll be ready soon, will fight for boxing's biggest prize, the heavyweight belt.

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Teddy Atlas was groomed from a young age to be a professional trainer by his mentor Cus D'Amato. Even before a back injury curtailed his fight dreams, the veteran D'Amato saw in Teddy an innate understanding of the sweet science. The master trainer was getting old and he wanted a young pupil to carry on his course of study; in this case the discipline was boxing. Cutting his teeth with a young Mike Tyson, driving young kids to smokers in the south Bronx, gaining fame between rounds as he sat on Michael Moorer's stool, admonishing his weary and demoralized charge to fight and ultimately beat then heavyweight king Evander Holyfield, Teddy Atlas proved himself an exceptional trainer.

Atlas is also an exceptional man with a strict code of conduct and in his world, loyalty is the paramount value. Atlas gives completely to the people that matter in his life and all he expects is the same in return. To his fighters, Atlas' loyalty is displayed day after day, hour after hour, three-minute round after three-minute round. To his TV audience as color commentator on ESPN's Friday Night Fights, Atlas' loyalty rings consistently honest notes. In a sport whose commentators are too often yes men for the corruption that taints boxing, Atlas never excuses or smoothes over the rough knuckles of greed and incompetence that beat fighters down. And his loyalty to do the right thing beyond the ring grew into the Dr. Theodore A. Atlas Foundation, named for his father, which has raised millions of dollars for those in need.

These days, Teddy Atlas' loyalty is with his charge Alexander Povetkin. The workout has only started but Teddy is there, right there. The stretching ends and Atlas starts to move Povetkin around the ring, working on the moves they have been working on since their relationship started a little over a year ago. Atlas gets inside, taps at Povetkin's forearms, gives the heavyweight angles and Povetkin responds, creating angles of his own, throwing short punches he pulls just before impact. Povetkin only speaks Russian and so a translator joins every camp. Atlas stops the action, delivers a line of instruction. "Don't do that," Atlas says and points to his eyes. "You've got to be in position." The translator, Alex Ledvin, delivers the instruction in Russian and Sasha nods his head.

The move is repeated, advice is given, then translated, English echoing into Russian. "Don't let the elbow come out. Don't let the legs come out either. There's a right time for everything." Sasha listens, moves into Teddy, commits to the angle he's created, a plan in his eyes. Perfect. Teddy points to his head, no translation needed. "Now you're thinking," he says.

I have watched Teddy Atlas train Alexander Povetkin before and when I watch him I always think he is a teacher first. Working with Sasha in the ring, shouting out instructions as Sasha spars, stopping and starting the video session after each sparring session to go over the strengths and weaknesses of his fighter, pointing out openings, reinforcing lessons, revising the work, polishing it, Teddy Atlas does what the best teachers do. He teaches by repetition. He builds upon fundamentals. He molds and perfects, slowly, patiently, carefully. Atlas is literally hands-on...his hands are constantly on his fighter, demonstrating, guiding, maneuvering, relaxing. And Atlas is there from the beginning of the workout, from the first stretches, to the last second of recorded video time. He never takes a minute off, never stops thinking of his fighter and the fight. He is obsessed the way men of integrity need to be obsessed, the mark of the most loyal teachers. And in this sport that is not a sport, where men test their fears and face mortality, a real trainer, a trusted teacher, is invaluable. It is true that once the bell rings, a

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fighter is alone in the ring, but Teddy Atlas' fighters, when they walk back to their corners between rounds, must feel reassured that they are coming home to a place of safety and trust and knowledge.

Alexander Povetkin steps into his protective gear. He has neither the face nor the demeanor of a stereotypical prize fighter. There are no central-casting flat features under his blond hair and when he speaks, his voice is quiet, his eyes seemingly kind. But from the back, his wide shoulders, and his strong neck and arms speak of heavyweight power and foreshadow his heavy hands.

The first sparring partner of the day is Monte Barrett, a seasoned heavyweight with 34 wins who lost his two bids at the title, but has beaten a number of name heavyweights and, most recently, knocked down the tree trunk from New Zealand known as David Tua for the first time in Tua's long career. One great advantage to watching sparring is that you can lean on the ring apron, the vantage point of judges and professional photographers, and watch the action. And in many ways that's what we're doing ringside, judging without points, zooming in on the legwork and handwork, creating pictures of our own, perhaps imagining Barrett as Klitschko, perhaps imagining what Povetkin could do.

Round 1 starts slow. It's not so much that Barrett wins the round, though he throws more punches, jabs to keep the solid Povetkin at bay, but that Povetkin doesn't let his hands go. I can see him seeing the angles. I can see him measuring distance. I can see him thinking. Atlas yells at Sasha to throw a double jab to close the space. "The jab is the beginning, not the end. No hesitation. Make a definite move. Close the gap." The words are echoed in Russian. The round ends. Povetkin walks back to his corner and remains standing while Atlas, laying his hands on his fighter, instructs.

Round 2 starts slow, again. Teddy continues to instruct. His surprising metaphors that raise the level of commentary on ESPN, are part of his lesson plan during this round. "We're not surprised. We're not surprised by the jab. Go to a definite place. We're the ocean. He's the log. Make him react to your movement." Sasha listens. He goes to a definite place. At the end of the round he is in full command, maneuvering Barrett where he wants him. In Round 3, Sasha lands two big right hands that stun Barrett. These are solid punches that come from a balanced, committed place. A third right hand knocks Barrett backwards. In Round 4 another big right, crisp jabs, body shots that leave Barrett jabbing for protection instead of offense. The bell rings and Barrett's shift is done.

Enter Derric Rossy, nine years younger than Barrett, about ten pounds heavier, who has won his last seven fights. Rossy's plan against Povetkin is to keep his distance, to throw jabs at the body, to circle the ring. Sasha goes into hunter mode, stalking Rossy with sliding footwork instead of bouncing with wasted effort as he did in his pre-Atlas days. It's an uneventful round. A few ineffectual punches land off Povetkin's body, fewer land on his headgear, and, listening to Atlas' instructions, Povetkin double jabs at round's end, controlling the ring's geography with his arms instead of his legs. The buzzer sounds and the day's sparring is complete. Five rounds of work in the books.

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Atlas puts his hand on Sasha's shoulder and talks about the rounds, the translator earning his keep. "If you go by physical things that was your worst round. But it wasn't. You were seeing, planning. Let's not open the door and just look. Get to where you want to get to. Then do it. Do it with your feet. Do it with your upper body. Anticipate the next move. Anticipate the next position. Anticipate the next opportunity." This advice is tailor-made for Povetkin, a tutorial based on the student's strengths and weaknesses. Atlas' analogies to make things vivid for his fighter, to create pictures that will clarify his boxing lessons, metaphors that will define the un-definable, open the door for more metaphors. Atlas as teacher, revising his student's work. Atlas as sculptor, molding the clay, chiseling the rock. And then, fast as a pivot from orthodox to southpaw, Atlas switches focus from his charge to his charge's future opponent. "Why does he box like that? Why? He doesn't want to be in there. Stay in your place. That's your place. That's the right place." The he has to be Wladimir Klitschko, the master jabber who makes his home on the outside, who stays comfortably at home until his opponent is soft enough for more than just a jab. Inside is where a victory against Klitschko will happen. Inside—how to get inside, how to stay inside, how to look for openings inside, how to commit inside and, most important, how to think inside—is the lesson Teddy Atlas has been teaching, over and over, since his work with Sasha began.

Povetkin's people wanted to put their fighter in with the heavyweight champion months ago, hoping to cash in quickly on a big payday and pretending, at least publicly, that Povetkin was ready to win. Atlas knew better. Povetkin was a star amateur, but he needed seasoning as a professional, which meant he needed more fights as a professional.

Too many of Klitschko's opponents, both Klitschkos, have been too raw to handle the Ukrainian brothers' experience. Wladimir has 58 fights under his belt, which is Povetkin's professional record times three. Instead of accepting team Klitschko's terms and becoming part of the pattern that has kept this unexceptional fighter at the top of the division, Atlas wants to make sure his fighter is fight ready, not hype ready. Despite much criticism, foolish criticism, Atlas has stood firm. Povetkin is the world on Teddy Atlas' shoulders and Atlas certainly struggled with his decision to keep Povetkin from a quick payday—more than anyone, he understands the risks of the boxing game—but this Atlas never shrugged. He did the right thing for his fighter, staying loyal to Sasha. He stayed loyal to himself. And Atlas stayed loyal to those who love boxing. Fans should and will wait patiently until the time is ripe for a real fight, a competitive fight, and not an uninspired massacre at the end of Klitschko's long left arm.

The workout continues. Povetkin hits the speedbag, at first conservatively, playing the rat-tat-tat beat with expertise. Then Teddy has him pivot, deliver the right hand upward, single heavy blows about both power and speed. Then it's back to the ring where Povetkin does sit-ups and where, again, Atlas is hands-on, holding Sasha's ankles for crunches, holding Sasha's legs for side crunches. Monte Barrett leaves the gym, Rossy is packing up his gear, and the gym is quiet and I can feel the canvas shake each time Povetkin lifts himself toward his trainer.

The workout is almost over. Impressed with what he's seen today, Atlas tells Sasha that tomorrow may be the last day of sparring. Sasha seems to want more rounds, but Atlas knows when a fighter is ready. "There has to be a time to stop. I like what I see. We had good

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boxing. We improved every day. Physically. Mentally. In one week we go to do what we're supposed to do. We do it well. We do it smart. We do it round by round. And we do it like the best heavyweight in the world."

On Tuesday Atlas and Povetkin will fly to Berlin, Germany and on Saturday he'll take on Nicolai Firtha. Firtha is not a world-beater, but his 6'6", 250 pound frame is reminiscent of the heavyweight division's current world beaters. It's all about the molding, the sculpting, the preparation for this fight, but also for bigger fights to come. Teddy Atlas is not teaching toward a single final exam. He is teaching toward a career.

Each day's training ends with a video session, as teacher and pupil sit in the gym's back room, a small space with a desk that resembles an academic's office. They watch and Teddy teaches, stopping the tape every few seconds to point out an opening, to suggest a move, to compliment a smart decision. I'm back in college, in acting class, listening to my professor stop me short in the middle of a scene from *Golden Boy*, an old play about a violinist turned boxer. It was a short scene, but instead of letting each actor get through the whole scene before critiquing it, this professor stopped the scene after each false line, then asked us to go back to the beginning. As a student, I was frustrated, I wanted to move to the scene's end where the emotional fireworks happened, but eventually, stopped short dozens and dozens of times over the semester, I became a better actor. Each line became real. Each line had a concrete memory attached to it. By semester's end I was in acting shape. Here in the gym, it takes forty minutes to watch fifteen minutes of sparring work, but the teacher is doing his job and the student is taking notes. "It's a good feeling when you know something," Atlas says.

It has been a long afternoon of work. Teddy's last lesson is not a physical one but a mental one. Throughout this day's training and throughout all the training Teddy Atlas does, focusing the mind is paramount to focusing on the body; knowledge is more important than physical skill. Teddy doesn't just tell his pugilists to do something—he explains the why, the reason behind the move, the logic behind the plan. It's a technique passed down from Cus D'Amato, a technique Atlas has perfected with a touch of the poet. Atlas ends the day with a story, a story to counter Sasha's annoyance at himself that he felt lazy during certain moments in the ring.

"Your mind is not lazy," Atlas says and Ledvin translates. "In the old days fighters were miners. They were coal miners and they shoveled coal all day. They were tired. Not lazy. They didn't know what they were feeling they were so exhausted. But they fought at night. And their minds couldn't be lazy."

As in every fighter's life, there will be moments in Alexander Povetkin's future when he will be exhausted, when he will have to steel himself against fatigue and doubt and pain. But his mind will be strong. Teddy Atlas will make sure of that. The day started with outstretched arms. The day ends with outstretched arms, Alexander Povetkin embracing his trainer Teddy Atlas. When it's done right, boxing's special bond, part father/son, part teacher/pupil, all loyalty, is indeed special. And it's a bond that more often than not leads to success. Think of students who mention their teaching mentors before they mention themselves, citing the knowledge and inspiration they received in the classroom as the catalyst that helped them fulfill their life's dreams and goals. Think of Alexander Povetkin listening to instructions, nodding his head,

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clearly aware of the progress he's made over the year. Think of Teddy Atlas.

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FLee says:

I agree with Berlin that Teddy Atlas is that rare man of integrity in boxing. Thank you for this behind-the-scenes look at one of boxing's great teachers.