

Virgil Hunter, Trainer of the Year, Reveals Best Fighter in Ward Family

Written by Raymond Markarian
Wednesday, 08 February 2012 10:19



His Lordships Restaurant in Berkeley, Ca was the place we met with 2011 Trainer of the Year Virgil Hunter to discuss his life's work. The retired probation officer and trainer of the 2011 Fighter of the Year Andre Ward, was having lunch facing a backdrop overlooking the San Francisco Bay Bridge with over thirty retired colleagues that also worked in programs to help the troubled youth. Every month, Hunter meets with these old friends to relive old memories and talk shop.

During our visit, Hunter talked of being the generally recognized trainer of the year. In a reflective interview that speaks more of his commitment than accolades do, Hunter shows us where he paid his dues, tells how he broke ground in the fight game, explains the story of the best boxer in the Ward family.

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RM: Virgil, congrats on being named the 2011 BWAA Trainer of the Year. What did you think when you heard the news?

VH: I am very thankful. But first, I want to make sure the coaching fraternity that I came up with from 1996 to 2004, guys like Barry Hunter, Leon Lawson, Tony Morrison, Kevin Cunningham, Nazeem Richardson, Joe Sanders, and Don Livingston, get recognition. We grew in a fraternity together. This award is as much for them as it is for me. We had all these world-class amateurs and people would always say when they turn pro somebody else would train them and take them to the next level. But we knew that wasn't true. So, it's not just for me, it is for all of them.

RM: How did you start training fighters and why?

VH: I started training fighters when I was working with the probation department. I always knew I could build a fighter. I was always involved in boxing all of my life you know. I never fought professionally but I fought a bit. And I took an apprenticeship course for three or four years, learning different methods from different trainers in the Oakland gyms.

RM: So what did you have to do during your time as an apprentice, carry a bucket?

VH: You carry a bucket. You help with the fighters. You deal with the fighters' first-hand, help with fight plans. You wrap their hands for them, things of that nature. Basically you see the way these trainers deal with fighters. Each of them had their own way of doing it. As an apprentice, I had a chance to look at the fighters that they had and decide what was successful.

RM: Oakland boxing gyms?

VH: Yeah. I worked at the gyms in Oakland.

RM: Who were some of the trainers you learned from in Oakland?

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VH: Guys like Bobby Warren, Jimmie Simmons, Charlie Smith, and Tiger Floyd. These trainers are legends in the Oakland area. They have been doing it for 40 or 50 years.

RM: Did you hit any bumps in the road when you got started on your own?

VH: So when I started, I had a few kids that were undefeated and had good records but I was getting them out of juvenile hall. I would get a few kids to 14-0 or 15-0 and something would always happen. You know, they already had bad habits. They already had outside influences that would conflict with our training. They had a lot of negatives. So it was mentally draining. One time I had a kid really going but then he went to jail for having an affair with his own mother. When that happened I said one promise. If I ever did it again it would be a young kid. I had little patience for older fighters. It had to be a young kid, around nine or ten years old. The goals were to have him successful early so when the temptations came along, he had the conscience to balance it. He had the conscience to stay on the right and know that if he went too far to the left then he would blow all that he built on the right. And it turned out that way when I met Andre.

RM: How old were these older fighters that you speak of?

VH: They were about 17 or 18 years old.

RM: So what does it take to grow from an apprentice to a trainer?

VH: You have to cut your teeth man. You have to take somebody that doesn't know a left hook from a fish-hook and develop him from scratch. You can't call the person that paints a house the house builder unless he paved the concrete, raised the foundation, and did the framework.

RM: Are you saying there is a misconception about trainers?

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VH: The coaching fraternity is the coaching fraternity. I don't want to divide it because someone didn't start the way I started. I am not going to put any coach in a category because people start their apprenticeship in different ways. I'm just saying that I was able to develop a fighter from scratch. I know in my heart that I was always able to do that. And that's the question you have to ask. 'Could I develop a kid from scratch?' It goes deeper than just the physical part of training. There are a lot of things that you have to cope with that goes on outside of boxing.

RM: Like what?

VH: It is about communication. When you are developing a young fighter you deal with a lot of emotions. There is no money on the line, only pride. When there is no money on the line and you see a kid give everything he has to win a trophy you learn different things. It gives you the advantage to look at where you started and learn from your mistakes.

RM: Right. So you started working with Andre Ward when he was nine years old. When did you start feeling like you saw something special?

VH: I knew after six months that if he stayed with it he would be great. I had a great feeling that when we came together it wasn't for nothing. So I rode with it.

RM: Did you become Andre's godfather when his father passed away?

VH: No, I was his godfather before his father passed away. There never was a ceremony or anything like that. We just spent a lot of time together. I became a second father to him you know. Godson has more than just a ceremony attached to it. I feel like he is my godson because God sent me another son. And God sent him another father. So it is more of a spiritual connection. We didn't need a ceremony to confirm that title.

RM: OK. Did you have any doubts with Andre as a fighter? I mean, you spent a lot of time with the kid growing up. Did you ever feel like 'man, what if this kid doesn't pan out?'

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VH: I had other fighters. I had Andre's brother Jonathan. He was an amateur national champion with a record of 56-4. Jonathan is well-known in that fraternity. Actually, to be real about it, he had more talent than Andre.

RM: Yeah?

VH: Yeah. But he didn't like to train. He won tournaments until he was 16. Then he wanted to do other things. But when he stopped he was 56-4. I had Karim Mayfield and Antawn Hicks as amateurs as well.

RM: Well, how did you know you were on the right path with Andre? We have talked in the past about some trainers getting a lack of respect. How did you know you were doing the right thing with Andre?

VH: Because I loved what I was doing and he made boxing fun. He had the same commitment as I did. So I was all the way in.

RM: Now, after all you have been through, you are the 2011 BWAA Trainer of the Year. Does it get any better than this?

VH: Well, it is a tremendous honor. And I'll just say the goal is to shoot for the moon because if I miss I am still among the stars.

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ICEMAN JOHN SCULLY says:

Good to see a lesser known (until now) trainer get top recognition...there are A LOT OF good

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trainers out there that people have never heard of...yet...

dino da vinci says:

The Iceman Cometh. Welcome John. Good people of TSSU, most of you know John and his accomplishments. For the newcomers to the sport, John has worn many different hats as pertains to the fight game, and remarkably well at that. As for solid knowledge and boxing acumen, you won't do better.

ali says:

Virgil Hunter seem like a good dude I wish him and Andre Ward the best of luck.

dino da vinci says:

@Ali. Not enough good things can happen for Virgil and Andre. They are a part of everything that is right with boxing.

You have to feel for Virgil. How would you like to invest time with a fighter, time you're not compensated for, only to have them fall into life's pitfalls. Or worse, their mother's arms. Amazing.

MisterLee says:

Virgil Hunter '2012!!

ICEMAN JOHN SCULLY says:

[QUOTE=dino da vinci;13372]The Iceman Cometh. Welcome John. Good people of TSSU, most of you know John and his accomplishments. For the newcomers to the sport, John has worn many different hats as pertains to the fight game, and remarkably well at that. As for solid knowledge and boxing acumen, you won't do better.[/QUOTE]

[B]Wow, thanks for the nice words!! (Should I pay u now or later?? [/B]

ICEMAN JOHN SCULLY says:

Thank u, Dino, for the nice words!!!