

Francesco Damiani, the Best Italian Heavyweight since Primo Carnera

Written by Luca De Franco

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Francesco Damiani was one of the few Italian heavyweights to make a big impression abroad. Between 1985 and 1993, he fought 32 professional bouts compiling a record of 30 wins (24 KOs) and just 2 losses. He became European, WBC International and WBO world champion, defeating many respected boxers along the way: Eddie Gregg (KOed during the first round), James Broad (on points), Anders Eklund (sixth round KO), Tyrell Biggs (TKO in five rounds), Johnny DuPlooy (third round KO) and Greg Page (unanimous decision after ten rounds). Damiani's losses came against Ray Mercer and Oliver McCall, two guys who weren't so well-known back then, but later built excellent careers. Francesco also won the silver medal as a super heavyweight in the 1984 Olympics, losing to Tyrell Biggs in the final. Some American boxing people told me that Francesco could have made it big in the United States, given the constant lack of competitive white heavyweights, and considering the importance of being Italian in such major markets as New York and New Jersey. Even though Damiani fought in Atlantic City (three times), Totowa and East Rutherford (NJ), Las Vegas (NV) and Memphis (TN), he choose to live in Italy. Let's discover why.

Francesco, why you didn't move to America?

Because my manager Umberto Branchini decided not to make that move. I left those decisions to him. I considered him the greatest Italian manager of all times. In fact, he is one of the few Italians inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame. After winning the Olympic silver medal in Los Angeles, he said I had to aim straight to the top. That's part of the reason why he decided to put me only against foreign opponents, he wanted me to gain professional experience fast and be known outside of our country. I'm probably the only Italian boxer who never fought another Italian. Umberto also wanted me to make a lot of money and he was successful in that. I never had to work from Monday to Friday; boxing was my only job. I can legitimately say that I had a great career, financially.

Let's talk about your opponents. Who was the toughest?

James Broad. He had a record of 20 wins and 3 losses, had won the NABF title and was very respected. Besides, our fight was an eliminator for the IBF title and that added pressure on me. I knew he was tough, but not that tough. I can say the opposite about Greg Page. He had a big reputation because was a former WBA champion, but I won easily: 95-93 on all scorecards. He boxed dirty (and was deducted points), but his punches never hurt me.

What about Tyrell Biggs?

He beat me in the Olympic final, and other times before that. As we say in Italy, he was the black sheep of my amateur career. When I fought him professionally, I was determined to win big and I did it in five rounds: the bout was stopped because of a cut over Biggs' right eye. You know, in the Olympic quarterfinal Tyrell defeated Lennox Lewis, who a few years later gave him a serious beating (third round TKO) as a pro. I think Biggs had a great technique, but was too

much of a nice guy to be successful in American professional rings. He wouldn't have hurt a fly.

When you KOed Johnny DuPlooy for the WBO title, many journalists didn't consider you a legitimate world champion because that organization was new at the time. Did you feel disrespected?

No, because I didn't care about what my detractors wrote. I knew that Johnny DuPlooy was a respected boxer (his record was 22-2-1) and that my KO win helped me be recognized as a power-puncher. Besides, I had been European champion and wanted a world title. The WBO offered me the opportunity to be its first champion and I accepted. Today, everybody considers the WBO a major organization and that makes my title a legitimate one. In my opinion, the boxers count more than any title. If two bums fight for the WBC crown, the winner cannot consider himself a world champion. If two top-rated heavyweights fight for the belt of a minor sanctioning body, that title becomes meaningful.

Why did you never face Mike Tyson?

Because my manager didn't reach an agreement with Mike Tyson's manager. Umberto told me that Don King offered us \$500,000. It was a ridiculous amount of money for a big fight, especially compared to the purses Tyson was receiving back then (over \$20,000,000). Besides, if I won I would become a Don King's fighter and that wasn't good for me.

You dominated Ray Mercer, before being knocked out. What really happened?

It just happened that he got me with a lucky punch to the nose that made the blood flow into my throat. I couldn't breathe and the 10-count was over before I could figure out what to do. I never experienced anything like that in my career. Thinking about it now, I could have kept going until the end of the round, and during the break my trainer would have told me how to recover. I dominated for eight rounds (the scores were 79-73, 79-74 and 78-74). I'm sure I would have dominated the rest of the fight. You know, these things happen in boxing.

What about your loss to Oliver McCall?

I wasn't motivated anymore, so I didn't train properly. If I had been just at 60%, I would have won easily. In fact, after that loss, I retired.

What are you doing now?

I'm one of the coaches of the Italian amateur team. To become a legitimate coach, I had to pay my dues like anybody else. In Italy, it doesn't matter if you have been a champion, you must learn the proper way to coach attending the seminars organized by the national boxing commission (FPI). The first step is attending a seminar in the region where you live: it's two full days for four consecutive week-ends; at the end you must pass a test to become a prospect. The second step is working two years with a certified coach. The third step is going to the commission's main training center in Santa Maria degli Angeli (central Italy) and live there for one week to attend another seminar where you receive high-level instruction. If you pass the

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final test, you become a legitimate coach. I'm proud to have made it as a coach and I'm really enjoying this new experience.

Francesco Damiani

Born: October 4, 1958 in Bagnacavallo, a town in the Emilia Romagna region of Central Italy

Division: Heavyweight

Height: 190 cm

Stance: Orthodox

Manager: Umberto Branchini

Trainer: Elio Ghelfi

Record: 30 wins (22 KOs) and 2 losses

Titles: WBC international champion (1987), European champion (1987-1988), WBO world champion (1989-1991)