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Some of the hardiest people in the world, the indigenous Tarahumara, reside in the sierras of Chihuahua, Mexico. For centuries, a mix of below zero winters, high altitudes, drought stricken summers and a lack of modern technology, have made the area habitable only to the truly rugged.

Daniel Ponce De Leon, of Cuauhtémoc, Mexico, a former world champion and Tarahumara himself, was lucky enough to escape those harsh conditions and through sheer guts, some luck and determination, rose to become an Olympian boxer and eventually a world champion in the 122 pound division.

"The Tarahumara have gone through a lot but they always persevere," De Leon, 31, said from his home in Southern California. "I always carry their resilience and fighting spirit into the ring with me."

De Leon (41-4, 34 KO's) is looking to make a run for another world title after two consecutive losses to current world champions Yuriorkis Gamboa and Adrien Broner. In losing, De Leon still managed to put on competitive showings against both men. "There are some who felt I won the fight against Broner," he stated. "He's a good, fast fighter but he couldn't do much to me and I got to him. I lost but the experience helped me grow as a fighter quite a bit."

Currently fighting in the featherweight division, he gave his career a serious shot in the arm after signing a management deal with Frank Espinoza, who also manages the careers of world champion Abner Mares and several undefeated prospects. "For a few years I was handling matters myself and it was very difficult. It was hard for me to focus," he stated. "It makes me motivated to know I have Frank taking care of the business aspect of my career. All I have to do now is train hard and win."

Espinoza thinks De Leon has a lot left despite coming off two losses. "He put on good performances. I don't think those losses brought his stock down very much," Espinoza said. "He's proven he has what it takes to be a world champion. He did it before and he'll do it again. He has the punching power and mindset of a champion."

De Leon must first try and get through tough Tijuana fighter Omar Estrella (15-3-2, 10 KO's) on Saturday, January 21st in Ensenada, Mexico. Anyone in the boxing business knows to never count out a fighter who's come through the Tijuana boxing system. They may have spotty records sometimes but they're usually well-tested and usually full of bad news for their opponents. "I know a little bit about Estrella. He's strong and has a solid technique. He has a deceptive record," De Leon said. "I would never look past him. I trained just as hard for him as I did for any world champion."

De Leon's awkward technique, or lack thereof, has been the subject of debate by critics who believe that throwing power punches with such reckless abandon leaves De Leon open to sharpshooters like Gamboa and former world champion Juan Manuel Lopez who devastated De Leon with a first round stoppage. "The fact is that he caught me cold," De Leon remembers of the 2008 loss. "He's a good fighter but it was a lucky punch. I've worked on tightening my defense since then."

His quest for self improvement has led him to devouring hours of Floyd Mayweather Jr. and Manny Pacquiao fights. "I've been really studying them," he said. "I've actually made some small changes to my style from what I've learned."

But let's face it. There's no way to teach a 31 year old boxer new tricks. De Leon at his core is a heavy fisted brawler who shows up to dish out punishment. He loads his punches with ill will and terrible intentions. If he connects, his opponents feel the power. If he connects enough, they usually end up on the canvas. That's just the way Daniel Ponce De Leon is and no amount of studying Pac-Man and Mayweather footage will ever change that.

He insists he's improved his defense quite a bit since the Lopez fight. "I don't get hit as much as I used to. What happened against Lopez would never happen again because I'm not the same fighter," he stated. "If the re-match against Juan Ma doesn't happen it won't be the end of the world but I'd love to face him again."

He may not have to wait long if everything lines up properly. Lopez is scheduled to fight a rematch against Orlando Salido who stopped the Puerto Rican star and stripped him of his undefeated status with an eight round stoppage in April of 2011. If Lopez wins, De Leon will have his sights set on him. "There are a lot of great fights for me. There's W.B.C. champion Jhonny Gonzalez which I think would be a great fight for me also," he said. "But getting a fight against Juan Ma Lopez would be tremendous. Revenge is always sweet."

He's determined to get back on top this year. "My goal for 2012 is to get a featherweight world title," De Leon said. "I've always accomplished my goals. Even as a young kid, I always set my sights high and eventually succeeded at whatever I set out to do."

He realizes he's at the age where the window of opportunity starts slowly closing for most fighters. "I've had a career where I haven't taken much punishment and I've always maintained myself in great shape but I realize I have to make the best of the next few years," said De Leon. "God willing, I expect to be champion and I expect the next stage of my career to be even more successful than the first. Keep watching me. You won't be disappointed. The least you'll ever get from me is a war inside the ring."

Saturday night's De Leon vs. Estrella fight will be broadcast on Televisa from La Bodega De Boxeo in Ensenada, Mexico. Also on the broadcast will be bantamweights Leo "Terremoto" Santa Cruz (18-0-1, 10 KO's) vs. Alejandro "Payasito" Hernandez (24-8-2, 13 KO's).

Golden Boy Promotions and Box Latino will promote the event.

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