

Trainer Cunningham Defends Alexander's Honor

Written by Michael Woods
Monday, 31 January 2011 00:06

Tough sport, this boxing. When you win, the payoff can be heavy, and the praise heady. When you lose, though, the critiques fly at you and only you. Devon Alexander was on the receiving end of some pretty harsh commentary, from pundits, from fans, and even some of his fellow brothers in arms after his Saturday night bout with Timothy Bradley was stopped a minute into round ten.

The scrap, tagged before as the "Super Fight," was halted on the advice of a ring physician, Dr. Peter Samet, who assessed Alexander after action was halted when Bradley's skull smashed against Alexander's left eye region.

Alexander, clearly in pain, as he walked around the ring, moaning in distress, was led to his corner by referee Frank Garza. A cut had appeared on that left eye, not anywhere as severe as the one which formed on the right eye in round three, also from a head clash. Garza saw Alexander's state, and had the doctor hop up onto the ring apron, and give an informed opinion. "Can you open up your eyes? Both eyes, open up both eyes," he told Alexander. Alexander tried to open his eyes, both of which were closed. "If you can't open up your eyes, the evening's over," the doctor said.

Alexander shook his head, complained that "it burns," and several times opened both eyes, but just as quickly shut them again. Based on that interaction, and his training, the doctor told the ref that Alexander couldn't continue fighting.

The Twittersphere blew up. This was Alexander's No Mas moment, some said. Some called Alexander a dog. Some called him a quitter. I got into the act, less harshly than many if not most who were moved to weigh in.

"What's the consensus," I Tweeted. "People think Devon pulled a "no mas?"

I saw someone call Devon a mutt, and answered, "It looked a lil bit that way. But let's let some facts emerge first." And someone said Alexander pulled a Duran. "Let's let some more facts come out before we decide," I Tweeted. "I agree its looking like a minor no mas."

"I'm not sure what got into Alexander's eye, because it looked like he could open them both fully," HBO's Larry Merchant said as it became clear the fight was over. "Which isn't to suggest he was trying to get out of the fight, he was obviously feeling something."

Andre Berto touched on it when he Tweeted, "U can't train that thing that beats in ya chest either have it or u dont."

Ouch.

So it's out there. Maybe rightly so. But the more I mulled the ending, and the reaction among

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fight fans, and experts, and my reaction, I regretted the rush to judgment.

"He literally couldn't open his eyes," said Samet afterwards. "It was more than a cut. I thought a nerve had been severed. I thought his eye may have been paralyzed."

People, if that's what was going through the doctor's head, and we have zero reason not to take him at his word, or dismiss him as anything less than a competent practitioner, then we should walk back our opinion, or insinuation, that Alexander looked for an early exit.

I spoke to Alexander's trainer/mentor, Kevin Cunningham on Sunday night, to see if I could get some more clarity. He told me that Alexander needed six stitches on his right eye, to close a cut that went to the bone. And that he needed four stitches on the left eye. The stitch work was done by a plastic surgeon, Cunningham said.

The trainer also said that the physician who laced up the wounds said he stitched up nerves in the right eye. Now, not being on top of anatomy like I'd like to be, I hadn't known that the size and placement of nerves could be such that a healer could actually stitch them up. But such specifics aside, Cunningham pointed out that he couldn't fathom why Alexander would quit on a whim.

"The doctor stopped the fight," he told me. "The doctor feared it could be career ending. He said that Devon lost control of the eyelid coming up. The nerve prevented the eyelid from going up. Anyone questioning Devon's heart, I ask, was he getting beat up? Why would he fake an injury? Let's get serious here. The fight was going back and forth. It's not like my fighter was getting beat, was losing real bad. Devon has never, ever remotely shown any dog in him."

Let's let that last line sink in, and take it at face value. We opine, all of us. And 99% of the time, that's cool. But I think we all have to be quite careful, damn right myself included, when we question the heart of someone who has been giving their best effort for nine plus rounds. Cunningham agrees. "Anybody that's going to say that stuff, question his heart, then they don't know boxing," he said.

Regarding the action before the controversial stoppage, Cunningham said he thought the action was tighter than the wider scores indicated. (One judge saw it 98-93.) He would have liked to have seen his guy not move so much, get off more often. "He took too long to pull the trigger," Cunningham said of the St Louis boxer, who relinquished his WBC 140 pound belt in the loss.

When I mentioned that it looked to me that too often Devon wasn't punching through his target, the trainer didn't disagree. He said that was because Alexander was mindful of the next impending headbutt, and that sitting in the pocket, and being in position to absorb that noggin blast wouldn't have been prudent.

No, Cunningham said, he didn't think the outsized expectations tightened his kid up, or grew butterflies which threw him off his game. The headbutts, he said, did mess up Devon's

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performance. "Bradley was landing with his head before he landed a punch," Cunningham said.

"The butts interrupted the flow and rhythm of the whole fight." Cunningham certainly has no love for ref Garza, who he said he warned before the bout that Bradley was something of a billy goat. "I knew I had a problem with him (before the match)," he said.

That said, Cunningham has zero doubt his kid will be back on top. He knows there won't be an immediate rematch, but he'd game for a redo. "It is unfinished business," he said.

Cunningham said Alexander on Sunday was disappointed, and is wearing some war wounds. But all those, he said, came from butts, not punches. "We are gonna regroup," Cunningham said. "My kid is 23. He's only gonna get better."

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Radam G says: Wow! From da JUMP, I mentioned what Bradley would do with his head, and I'm disappointed that Devon felt into the great trance that TB's noggin blasts put him in. Even the thoughts of Desert Storm's dome blasts put da double whammy on Devon and chased on da Alexander Da Great part wif da slicing and dicing slammy. Holla!

brownsugar says: I think something can be done to limit headbutts,.. the ref used to be instrumental in warning fighters whether it was an accidental butt or not. eventually points would be deducted and guys would make a conscious effort to keep the heads out of the way. Even clashes of styles and lefty vs rightie doesn't justify so many butts in one fight. It was just a sloppy fight.....the ref should have exercised more control (Bradley still would have won) ...Mayweather hardly ever got butted because he hid his head behind his shoulder or he planted his head in his opponents chest or sticks an elbow in the opponents neck. if you notice Floyd never lets his opponents head get close unless it's from a safe angle....Ali used the grab the back of the head and push down or place his head on the side of is opponents.he was very proactive in creating space between the noggins.... HeadButt Avoidance used to be a standard skill in the ring, Now only the very best boxers know how to keep themselves from getting hit unnecessarily with butts.. Alexander will be back, just needs to pick up some of the subtle skills and loosen up some. I can't say if Devon gave up or couldn't continue. But the ref made the only decision he could under the circumstances.

amayseng says:

wow, first off who is berto to talk and comment on anyone about heart when he fights jr ww's and wont fight a legitimate ww??? berto is a disgace and a big mouth, he talks smack then when cintron comes calling him out and calling him names then all a sudden berto cant muster a word...more importantly devon lost this fight because he trainer FAILED. his trainer should have had him well versed in jabbing, scoring with combinations and staying away NOT clinching where devon was susceptable all night to clashing heads....devon was holding ALL night long, ALL the time and put himself in those situations. i like alexander as a fighter but this loss is on

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him and his trainer. apparently his trainer was too busy talking smack instead of using his mind and developing the correct game plan against tim.