

Boxing Gives Lee Ortega A Reason For Being

Written by Michael Woods

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Of all sports, when you take a look at a guy's record, and see he has been away from the game for a long spell, in boxing, there is an OK chance that it was because he was removed from circulation for a bit. Boxing does tend to attract men who like to follow their own path, who don't conform to societal norms without testing limits and boundaries. But because the sport embraces these iconoclasts and outcasts and rough diamonds, I try to remind fans and haters alike that boxing serves an important purpose in our world. It gives a reason for being for people, frequently young men without means and social connections who are under-served in our increasingly every-man-for-himself atmosphere in the United States, where income inequality is at levels not seen in 80 years. Boxing welcomes in the angry, the frustrated, the scorned, and shows them how discipline and becoming part of a surrogate family and team and aiming for a goal that promises no easy riches and no certain fulfillment can carry them away from a life of aimless drifting towards the margins where jail or an early death awaits them. Boxing every year takes hundreds of boys who are destined for a flameout, for a prematurely curtailed life marked by a trail of mental, emotional and physical carnage, and helps re-mold them into contributors to society. We don't hear about that much, because most of us tend to gravitate toward the negative, but boxing has prevented countless murders and assaults and incarcerations over the years. Think about it.

Lee Ortega is a guy who has a gap in his record. He debuted as a pro in 2000, fought six times in nine months...and then fell off the map. He went 4-2, and in fact fought Paul Williams in his first professional outing.

So, where was he?

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"I was away," the 35 year-old, who grew up in the South Bronx and now lives in Connecticut, told TSS. "I'm not proud of saying this, I was incarcerated. That's my past life. I was trying to make easy money, and I chose the easy wrong over the hard right."

Ortega paid his debt to society, and exited the facility ten months ago. He picked up his gloves and is now hustling to make up some lost ground. Now trained by John Scully and Robert Lee Velez, who used to train Hector Camacho Sr., Ortega scored a UD5 win against Darryl Johnson in North Carolina on May 19, fighting at super middleweight in his first fight in 11 years.

Ortega in his previous life got good at boxing in the Army, and then was gunning to make the US Olympic squad in 2000. He fell short, so he decided to turn pro. He got busy but then a car accident, while he was living in Georgia, busted him up. He moved to NY, but found the cost of living excessive and so he moved to Connecticut. He sold used cars and did body work. But he fell prey to temptation, to the lure of easy money, via drugs. The FBI nailed him, and he went away for 41 months.

"I had a lot of time to think, see where my mistakes came from," Ortega said. "I lost some of the best years of my athletic life but I believe I came out stronger and with more knowledge. I proved it against Johnson. I fought in his hometown. I always had butterflies before a fight but on that night, I had tunnel vision. I wanted to take him out, because I want to get somewhere."

You get that? Boxing is giving this guy, who has a track record of trying mightily to stay focused on positive goals but sometimes straying, a reason to stay on the sunny side of the street, keep clear of the shady. He has an enormous reservoir of pride, but the pride can hurt him, as when in prison he refused to run with a gang, and they tried to enlist him, and he had to fight to keep clear, and time was added to his calendar. Lee Ortega today is an example of boxing being a good thing for society.

"Boxing helps me keep focused on something good. I never did drugs, I don't drink or smoke, I'm still pink inside. Boxing is not just a sport. You take it serious you can change your life. There's no going out, I'm training for fights. Before a fight, I can't have sex, I got to keep my legs strong. I want to thank God because he gave me wake up call. I am hungry and determined," he said. "Now, it's all or nothing. At my age I can't be BSing."

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