

Andre Ward: S.O.G. & A.T.G.

By [Caryn A. Tate](#) on September 21, 2017



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On September 21, unified light heavyweight champion and pound-for-pound #1 fighter Andre Ward announced his retirement from the sport of boxing. As he's known in boxing, "S.O.G." (abbreviation for "Son of God," in honor of his Christian faith) retires undefeated, with 32 wins, 16 of them coming by knockout. Not only is he undefeated as a professional; he hasn't lost a fight since he was 13 years old, as an amateur, and he and his trainer and godfather Virgil Hunter maintain that even that loss was a bad decision.

When speaking to me back in June prior to his final fight, Ward said, "When I look at my history and the sport of boxing, the greats that I saw, the ones that helped mold my style and the ones that helped me get to the place where I am today, the guys that have been on top for 10 years, 8 years—they could do it all. They could bang with you when it was to their advantage. They could outbox you when it was to their advantage. They could do it all."

So, too, could Ward.

Andre Ward won an Olympic gold medal in the light heavyweight division in 2004. In order to make the minimum weight, he had to eat and drink prior to the weigh-ins; and according to Hunter, Ward never weighed above 169 for a fight at the weight limit of 178 in the Olympics. Hunter has stated that he thought this would be a smart strategy for Andre, as he would be stronger while his opponents would be weakened from struggling to make weight. Virgil Hunter, as usual, proved to be 100% correct. The other light heavyweights poked fun at the smaller Ward, but when he defeated every one he was pitted against and took the Olympic gold, Ward had the last laugh.

And being the smaller fighter, matched against someone perceived as a monster or a power puncher who mows everyone down, was a recurring theme throughout Ward's career. Back in June, when I spoke with Ward prior to his rematch with Sergey Kovalev, Andre spoke about that experience. "I try not to get caught up in a person's reputation, or how big they are. Because I feel like God has put me in those positions my whole life. Since I've been a kid, in the Olympics—I was never the biggest guy. I've always kind of been understated. That's just my lane and my story, and I've learned to be comfortable there. It's just a tremendous source of motivation, knowing I can overcome in those situations, regardless of what it looks like."

Overcoming doubt and persevering in the face of injuries and bigger, perhaps stronger opponents were the themes of Ward's Hall-of-Fame-worthy career.

When he turned professional in late 2004, many pundits doubted whether the Bay-area native could compete at the top level as a professional. He was too small, they said. He didn't have enough power. When he faced tough gatekeeper Darnell Boone in November 2005, Boone dropped Ward in the fourth round. The criticisms increased. He didn't have a good chin, they said. He'd never last as a pro.

But Ward continued his journey and continued to win. In May 2009, he faced the incredibly difficult Edison Miranda, who at time had a record of 32 wins with 28 knockouts. Miranda was known as heavy-handed and had a reputation as a knockout artist. Going into the bout, many thought it would be telling, that they would finally get to see Andre against a high level and truly tough opponent. Ward was seen as clean-cut (as both a fighter and a person), a very good but slick and traditional boxer. Miranda was the battle-hardened, rough and sometimes dirty veteran.

Ward's tough-as-nails performance surprised most people. He was cut from a headbutt that may have been intentional in round 1, but it didn't faze him—Ward showed dogged determination in the fight. He not only endured Miranda's rough tactics; he showed that he wasn't simply a slick and traditional boxer. Ward showed he could get rough himself, banging away at Miranda and using his superb footwork to keep his opponent moving, and to manipulate distance. He set traps for his opponent, and it was as if Miranda didn't have any choice but to fall into them. But the beauty of it was, Ward didn't just outbox Miranda from the outside; he also took the fight to him on the inside, displaying old-school grit and infighting skills that just aren't commonly seen in modern boxing. As the fight wore on, Miranda looked exhausted and, honestly, surprised. In short: Andre Ward out-toughed and out-roughed Edison Miranda.

The next big step in Ward's career began in November 2009. The Super Six World Boxing Classic, a tournament broadcast on Showtime, featured the top six super middleweights in the world to be pitted against one another: Mikkel Kessler, Carl Froch, Arthur Abraham, Allan Green, Jermain Taylor, Andre Dirrell, and Andre Ward. Ward, despite being an Olympic gold medalist, was the decided underdog headed into the event. The other fighters in the tournament had largely proven much more as professionals, and the favorite to win was Dane Mikkel Kessler, the WBA super middleweight world champion.

In his first fight of the tournament, Ward drew Kessler. Pundits reacted to the draw by stating it had to be the worst draw possible for Ward—and on paper, it was. The underdog vs. the favorite, right off the bat. Plus, Kessler was the deserved favorite—he was a highly accomplished fighter, elite-level, with excellent skill. No doubt most viewers expected Kessler to dominate the over-eager kid from Oakland or even to stop him, since there was still the myth swirling that Ward didn't have a very good chin.

They couldn't have been much more wrong.

Ward basically pulled out all the stops versus Kessler. The fighters began by boxing, feeling each other out, but Ward felt comfortable enough to switch to southpaw towards the end of the very first round. The American used his elite-level athleticism to toy with Kessler's range, to move almost constantly so that Kessler never had an easy target, and expertly slipped many of the champion's shots. Ward continued to occasionally switch stances to manipulate Kessler's comfort-level and keep him guessing. As the rounds went on, Kessler appeared confused as to what strategies he should use to have success, while Ward was loose and comfortable, and

never let up on the pressure he applied to Kessler. Sometimes he brought the fight inside when the opportunity presented itself, but even at range, Ward applied constant pressure that Kessler clearly found difficult to deal with. Kessler was cut over his left eye and under his right eye as a result of several accidental headbutts, which came from the clash of styles and constant movement from both athletic men. In the end, the fight was stopped due to cuts in the 11th round. It was a result few would have foreseen. While his win over Kessler didn't silence doubters, it was a proclamation to those who know boxing that Ward would not be denied.

Throughout the Super Six tournament, Ward showed such a wide facet to his game that it was somewhat startling. Most fighters are good at one or two important things, and they're good enough at those things that they can overcome other top fighters. But Ward showed that he could do it all. When he faced power-punching Allan Green, Andre's strategy was to fight Green on the inside, where most power punchers are least comfortable and where the sting from their shots is largely negated due to their lack of leverage. It was a beautiful performance by Ward, who stayed in Green's chest all night, pummeling him with shots upstairs and down. Andre's performance that night was reminiscent of old-school inside fighters like Sandy Saddler.

When Ward spoke to me in June about inside fighting, he spoke about the difficulty of learning it. "It's uncomfortable to learn how to be there—you're putting yourself in harm's way. You're right there in the mouth of the lion but you've gotta be willing to be there in order to get your work off."

He also spoke about how rare a skill infighting is in modern boxing. "Just like the jab is a lost art today, skilled inside fighting is really a lost art. A lot of guys don't want to be there—they want you at range, they want you at a certain place, and if they can't have you there, then you see a totally different fighter."

After defeating Green, Ward went on to defeat the heavy-handed Arthur Abraham by outboxing him, and in the final defeated Carl Froch by alternating beautiful and athletic boxing with rough inside work that kept the Brit perplexed. After the Froch fight, it was revealed that Ward entered the bout with a broken hand, but if one watched the fight without that knowledge, one would never know.

In 2012, Ward faced light heavyweight champion Chad Dawson at the super middleweight limit (at Dawson's suggestion, when he called Ward out after Dawson's defeat of Bernard Hopkins). Again, Ward's skills and athleticism astonished when he outboxed Dawson en route to a 10th round TKO.

Ward faced criticism in the media when he sued then-promoter Dan Goossen twice, seeking an end to his exclusive contract, which kept him out of the ring for a couple of lengthy periods. Many called him "entitled" or "arrogant," as if he was suing his promoter out of an inflated sense of self. But when Ward spoke on the matter, he clarified the crux of the legal issues was the fact that Goossen was Ward's co-promoter, and Ward discovered that Goossen wasn't paying the other promoter, Antonio Leonard. As **Ward stated**, "I took Dan Goossen's money and I took Antonio Leonard's money. I can't in good conscience walk away from this man after having taken his bonus and know that he's not getting paid." The situation highlighted the unfortunate bias against fighters from some mainstream media members, but most importantly the type of character and integrity possessed by Andre Ward.

When Ward returned to the ring, now promoted by Jay Z's Roc Nation Sports, in 2015, many wondered if he still had it. In 2016, Ward moved up to light heavyweight for a future face-off against Sergey Kovalev, who was then the universally recognized light heavyweight king and had a reputation as a monster, a knockout artist, in the sport. In his first fight at the weight, Ward dropped and defeated #1 contender and Cuban standout Sullivan Barrera, an incredible achievement—particularly because, as usual, Ward made it look almost easy.

When Andre faced Kovalev in **November 2016** and again in **June 2017**, I witnessed the fights from ringside.

The first fight was close, with Kovalev dropping Ward in round 2 and Ward winning a close unanimous decision. While it was a close fight, the skill, heart, determination, and absolute

doggedness shown by Andre Ward was stunning. Kovalev took Ward to a dark place early in that fight and Ward battled back to the light. As the rounds progressed, Ward's never-quit mentality and indomitable will were on full display as he hammered at Kovalev's body and fought his way back into the contest.

Still, it was a close and a somewhat contested win among some fans and media, so Ward rematched Kovalev in June of this year. Despite the rounds being competitive, as I said in my article on the fight, it never appeared to me that Kovalev was truly in the fight mentally. Ward seemed to have taken his confidence, but more importantly, Andre had taken Kovalev's greatest asset: his timing. By consistently feinting, slipping, and moving, Ward threw off the Russian's impeccable sense of timing and that seemed to sap Kovalev's confidence even more. In the end, Ward stopped Kovalev in the 8th round, a feat that most would never have thought possible before that night.

Andre Ward is comfortable at every range, at every pace, facing every style, in every situation. Many have struggled over the years to find a label that would fit him. Some call him a technician; others a spoiler; others a boxer. But the reason you can't find a label for him is because, as I stated in this article I wrote [earlier this year](#), Ward is formless. He doesn't have any one set style. He can adapt to any style in front of him and has a seemingly endless array of tools in his toolbox to choose from. He can do it all.

Just as importantly, Ward's mental quickness is a thing of beauty and a truly rare thing in a fighter. He seems to know what his opponent would going to do before they did it, and he sets traps for them in truly masterful ways. But he's not only mentally quick; he has displayed throughout his career an incredibly strong mind, a mental resolve.

As Ward stated [in this interview](#) prior to his first fight with Kovalev, he was told by coach Virgil Hunter years ago that "Taking a punch, some of it's physical but a lot of it is mental. Make up your mind right now that no matter what this man hits you with it is not going to be enough."

It's clear Andre made up his mind a long time ago that no matter what any opponent—in the ring or otherwise—brought to the table, it wasn't going to be enough to defeat him.

Outside the ring, Ward has devoted much of his time to helping others. Recently, he's been mentoring younger fighters. He's co-manager for Olympic silver medalist Shakur Stevenson, and he has mentioned that he's spoken with many other fighters about matters such as finances, fair treatment by promoters, and no doubt many other topics that are of vital importance for boxers. It's a role Ward thoroughly enjoys, and one he takes seriously. As he stated on a media call in June, "It's an honor and a privilege [to mentor these fighters]. I'm pro-fighter. We're not just commodities—we're human, we've got families. At the end of the day, these careers are gonna stop, and the cheers are gonna stop at some point, and what are you left with?"

By retiring now, on his own terms, at the very top of the sport, having achieved the seemingly impossible more than once, with his health fully intact and his finances secure, Ward has set an excellent precedent for the next generation of fighters. It is possible.

As a fighter, and as a person, Andre "S.O.G." Ward is a true inspiration and a pure champion, in the ring and outside of it. Always facing the best opposition and usually delivering dominant performances, Ward has earned every bit of credit and recognition he will get.

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