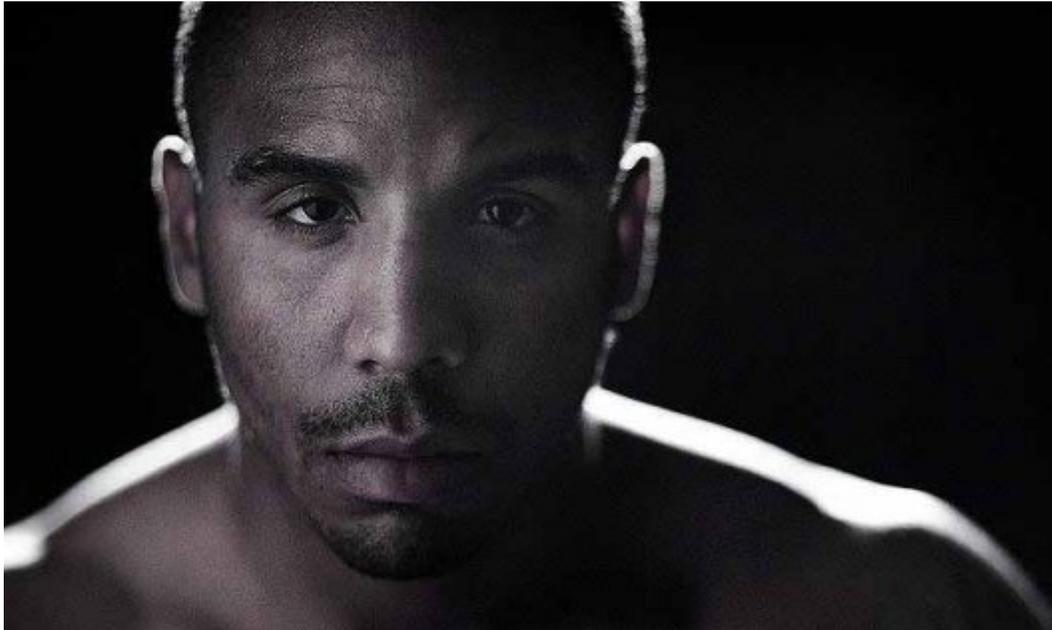


Andre Ward: Something That's in Me

By Caryn A. Tate on June 7, 2017



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Unified light heavyweight champion Andre "S.O.G." Ward (31-0, 15 KOs) takes on challenger and former champion Sergey "Krusher" Kovalev (30-1-1, 26 KOs) in a highly-anticipated rematch on Saturday, June 17, at Mandalay Bay Events Center in Las Vegas.

On Wednesday, Ward took time away from his busy training camp to participate in a conference call with the media, along with his head trainer, Virgil Hunter. During the call, I asked "S.O.G." about what it was like to get stronger as the first fight went on, and hurt Kovalev to the body as well as bloody his nose in the 10th round.

"It's just something that's in me," Andre said. "I've faced a lot of adversity in the ring—some of it the public has seen, and a lot of it maybe they haven't. In the gyms, in sparring, in everything you've got to do to get to a certain level in the sport. I knew what I had in me. I've been on the canvas before, I've been hurt in fights, I've been cut, things have happened in fights, and my response has always been the same where I want to get that back.

"I also have a tremendous coach in my godfather [trainer Virgil Hunter], and you saw him shift and go into a different gear and tell me what I needed to hear. He didn't panic but he had a

sense of urgency, and he told me what I needed to hear. He just reminded me of all the greats that had their moments, and he reminded me that this is your moment. Sometimes in fights, in training, and in moments like that—it's not so much technical, it's a feeling. And I felt what he was saying, and he knew that's what I needed to hear.”

In response to my question about Ward's ability—throughout his career—to “bully” bigger or seemingly stronger fighters in the ring, and how he prepares for that, he said, “On the physical side, again, it was Virgil having the foresight early on when I was a young boy seeing that I have a lot of ability and skill. He always told me, ‘I don't look at the things you do well. I look at where you can be beat.’ And this was probably when I was 11, 12, 13 years old—he said, ‘The only style that can give you trouble right now is a buzzsaw. So at that point he started to physically get me strong, and I just slowly over the years started to build my body up.

“And the same thing with the inside game. When I first started boxing, I was just a fighter. I didn't box at all. Then I evolved to the Olympic style into being more of a boxer, and as I turned professional, Virg realized that I needed to evolve and be able to do both, so he put that body vest on, put the big mitts on, and say we've gotta work on your inside game. And I honestly hated it. I used to hate doing those drills because they were uncomfortable, I wasn't used to them. And all of a sudden, in the Allan Green fight, it just showed up. And I've been trying to perfect it and be a master at it ever since.

“On the spiritual side, I try not to get caught up in a person's reputation, or how big they are. Because throughout my career 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 situation, regardless of what it looks like.”

When asked about infighting and other fighters having said how hard it is and what a lost art it is, Andre concurred. “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. And you'll notice and realize, 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.”

Trainer Virgil Hunter responded to my question about his incredibly inspirational corner talk, such as what he delivered to Ward during the first Kovalev fight, and whether he comes up with that motivation in the moment. “I don't do any sort of preparation in advance, as far as what I might say in the corner, for the simple reason that I would be just sort of grandstanding and creating some sort of script for myself. So that's not the situation at all. It's for the moment—people tell me what you're just saying, but I don't remember what I said [in the corner in the first Kovalev fight]. But my job is to be in that realistic moment, and if that's the way it was taken, then that's what it was intended to be.

“To tell him something that I know he would embrace and understand what I was saying, because it's been between he and I, things we've talked about over the years, many times. Sometimes you just have to put the strategy out the window and appeal to who you know that fighter is. And I know who he is. And I appealed to that side of him.”

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