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Coach Kay Koroma Exclusive: Training Team USA, Teaching Footwork and Fundamentals

By [Caryn A. Tate](#) on May 11, 2018



"Coach Kay," as his fighters affectionately call him, believes in putting his fighters first.

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“You don’t have to be a superstar. You could be whatever. But when you come by my gym, you’re all one. You’re all equal. You’re all family...”

Trainer Kay Koroma boasts quite the résumé: he and fellow coach Dennis Porter help young athletes develop at the Alexandria Boxing Club in Alexandria, Virginia. Koroma is also the National Assistant Coach on the USA Boxing team and performed as a member of the 2016 Olympic Coaching Staff, helping to lead them to several Olympic medals: bronze for Nico Hernandez; silver for Shakur Stevenson; and gold for Claressa Shields (her second).

But “Coach Kay,” as his fighters affectionately call him, believes in putting his athletes first. Boastfulness plays no part in Kay’s methods or in his gym, and therein lies the partial key to his success.

“I think a lot of people don’t use their mind, they use their ego,” Kay explained. “I feel like a lot of coaches’ egos are more out than teaching. Like, ‘I’m better than this coach or that person.’ And that affects their athletes, because you’re taking away from them rather than actually teaching them the mental aspect [of the sport].”

Kay was once a professional boxer himself before he began training. “I enjoyed being a boxer,” he said. “I couldn’t find those people who could bring out my true potential or show me that I could do certain things. Maybe the reason why was because I was always busy doing so many other things and just being there for everybody else. So I never really could say I put my all into the mental part of boxing.

“When I got out of boxing, I always had the love for it. But when I came back around it, this lady had asked me to basically save her kid—who’s still boxing for me right now. I just took a liking to him. When I started coaching I just felt like I wanted to be like some of the coaches I did have but be different. I wanted to train my athletes like—if they were eight years old, I wanted to train them like elite athletes that were 19 and above. And just have that feeling so they would be prepared for life. That’s what really made me make that transition—to save peoples’ lives, and also to make somebody do something they didn’t think they could do.”

Koroma feels strongly about having a close-knit and supportive environment in his gym. “I was fortunate enough to grow up around the world. I grew up in Africa for a little bit, I grew up in London. I saw everybody was different in their own certain way. I wanted my gym to be different: you don’t have to be a superstar. You don’t have to be the best-dressed. You could be whatever. But when you come by my gym, you’re all one. You’re all equal. You’re all family. You all look out for each other. When you walk outside my doors, you’re still family, you still look out for each other, you still watch each other’s backs. If he or she is in trouble outside the gym, I’m gonna be there for them.

“I just always wanted to make everybody feel equal. I always look out for the underdog. Because you [may] have more talent than the person that’s meant to make it. I’ve never closed my door to anybody.”

The USA boxing team had only won the occasional single Olympic medal in more recent decades until 2016, when Coach Kay was on staff. When asked what, if anything, had changed with regard to coaching the team that helped them achieve three medals in the same year, Koroma responded thoughtfully. “I think what helped out is I knew them from kids. So when they made the Olympic team, I knew a lot of them and I could gravitate towards them and help them. They knew there was nothing behind it, like me trying to get a position or a job.

“So I think one of the number one thing that I’ve seen so far is the trust factor. They believe that Coach Kay is gonna tell ‘em the truth. That Coach Kay is gonna be sure they’re one hundred percent. That if Coach Kay says I need you to do more, they understand and they believe that because I know them. I know where they come from at home. I know how they worked at home. So I never let them forget how they got here.

“I think the medal count came from some things like that—you have to make athletes believe in who they are and how they got here. Because you’ve gotten to the big stage, it’s not time to fall off. It’s time to really show more of who you are and what your coaches have taught you at home.”

With all of his experience and his emphasis on fundamentals, Kay is a wealth of information regarding boxing technique and how to teach a fighter certain tactics. He explained his take on mitt work and why he’s a proponent of it—when utilized correctly. “When I get on the mitt work, it’s not about, oh, you’re a fast puncher, you’re gonna throw 50 punches a round. My mitt work is more about making it realistic. Realistically, you’re not gonna go in there and [throw] 60 or 80 punches or do all this fancy stuff. My mitt work is gonna be stuff you’d do to an opponent.

“If you’re gonna do a one-two, you’re gonna step over to the right and counter it. I want you to counter it correctly, so your mind, body, everything is in sync together. So you’re not gonna fall off balance—put more weight over your front knee or your back leg.

“If I want you to throw a one-two, I’m not gonna slam the mitts at your hands. I’m gonna have the mitts close, standing there, because that opponent’s not gonna come to your punch. I’m gonna teach you—look, you’re holding your punch in because I’m not moving my hands and you’re not touching me. I’m gonna teach you to take your feet with you, to correctly turn your punch over, why you’re turning your punch over, why you’re extending it this way, and how you can feel the difference in snapping the punch.

“Once they get the rhythm of that, they can see the difference.”

All experts in the sport agree that good footwork is high on the list of fundamentals needed for sustained success in the ring. But how does one teach it? Kay elaborated: “There’s a lot of exercises for that, and I think the key thing with good feet is just reminding the athlete to always take their feet with them. If you watch in boxing, a lot of athletes don’t take their feet with them, or don’t turn their hips when throwing their punches—it’s all upper body. The footwork comes from [the trainer] having that eye and constantly pointing out to them, hey, your feet aren’t coming, you’re not turning your foot on this, you’re reaching because you’re leaving your back leg.

“You can do all these foot drills and stuff like that, but when you get in the ring, it never shows up. Because the mind and the body aren’t [working] as one. You’ve done all these drills, but you’re not constantly telling them, your foot’s not coming, or you’re not doing this. So for me, if I have a person who leaves their back leg a lot, I’ll tell them, if you bring your back leg with you, I guarantee your right hand will be way stronger than it is now. They’re like, no, coach, I am bringing it. So I’ll put a resistance band around their ankles, so every time they take their feet, they’ll see now they’re not bringing their back leg. In their mind, they thought they were.

“So I’ll constantly do that, without throwing no punches for maybe three or four rounds. And then I have them start throwing their punches because they’ll get comfortable in three or four rounds, just stepping.

“But then you throw them off when they start throwing punches too. They’re not getting it right anymore. Now you’re saying, see, you’re leaving your back leg again. You’re not stepping to your left or your right. And then you start showing them, hey, bring your back leg and you’ll see a difference. Now when you put those mitts in front of them with the resistance band on, or put them in front of a bag, the sound of the bag when they hit the punches sounds a lot different from when they were leaving their legs or they weren’t stepping to the side.”

Aside from developing great feet, Kay spoke more about the tactics he uses that help create complete fighters.

“Now you keep on adding to that. You start adding defense in it—so you have the resistance band on them, you’re coming at them full force, and they’re having to move, stepping to the left or right, not leaving their feet, turning, and being right back in position to throw a punch. Being able to step at an angle instead of straight back.

“If you look at Andre Ward, he’s always in position for a punch, no matter where he’s at. No matter how people criticize him—you can criticize him that he’s a ‘basic’ boxer. He uses ‘basic’ boxing and he dominates people that

may be physically stronger than him, faster than him, bigger than him, have great footwork. But he's always in position for another punch and always in position to protect himself. His footwork is great. If he gets touched with something, he makes it up. He's always in position."

Watch Kay Koroma, along with veteran coach Al Mitchell, in the corner of rising lightweight star and 2016 U.S. Olympian Mikaela Mayer on Saturday, May 12, on the undercard of Linares vs. Lomachenko. Mayer's bout and the rest of the undercard will air live on ESPN+ starting at 4:30pm ET.

[USA Boxing Promotes Kay Koroma](#)

More with Kay Koroma to come..

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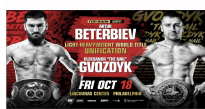


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