

Guillermo Rigondeaux: Something Supernatural

By Caryn A. Tate on May 17, 2017



"There is a Cuban saying, 'Dogs that bark loud have no bite.'" (Photo: Willie Suarez)

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Some athletes are so skillful that they seem almost untouchable in the primes of their careers. Many of these athletes are so gifted that they make their mastery of their art form look easy to the untrained eye, which sees none of the daily toil and sacrifice it took to achieve greatness.

WBA Super World super bantamweight champion boxer Guillermo Rigondeaux (17-0, 11 KOs) is such an athlete. A legendary amateur boxer, "El Chacal" ("The Jackal") won two back-to-back Olympic gold medals, in 2000 and 2004, representing his native Cuba. All in all, he fought nearly 475 times in the unpaid ranks and lost only 12 times. He was commonly referred to as the greatest amateur fighter to ever lace up the gloves.

But Rigondeaux wanted more than what the restrictive Cuban government would provide. He hungered to prove himself as a professional, on the world stage—to be the greatest fighter to ever lace up the gloves, not just the greatest amateur.

In 2009, with the support of his family which stayed behind, Rigondeaux defected Cuba (his second attempt, in what he would later tell Brin-Jonathan Butler was the most traumatic experience of his life). He traveled the dangerous journey—reminiscent of an imaginative

adventure tale, yet unfortunately all too real—via Mexico City, and settled in Miami, where he still resides. He turned professional that same year and has gone on to tear a swath through the super bantamweight division, demolishing the incredibly talented Nonito Donaire in April 2013 that stunned the boxing world. Since then, his career has had fits and starts, but now that he's co-signed to Jay-Z's Roc Nation as a promoter, he intends to put inactivity behind him and continue to seek out—and beat—the remainder of the best fighters in the world in and around his weight class.

With his experience with the often unsavory business side of boxing, Guillermo Rigondeaux has a message for younger fighters to avoid the many pitfalls that continue to be so common. "Have a great set of team members to always back you up," he said. "Have trust in your boxing trainers and coaches, and remain fully focused inside the ring as that is all that you can show the world and what truly counts."

Like many of his compatriots, Rigondeaux has a sad, haunted look lurking in his eyes, and one gets just a small sense of some of the suffering he must have endured to get where he is today. To add to the mystique surrounding him, on the rare occasion that one of the best boxers in the world allows a smile to cross his face, bright gold teeth are revealed. By melting down both his gold medals to be attached to his teeth, Rigondeaux ensured that his greatest amateur achievements could never be taken from him.

For non-Cuban fight fans, there is a bit of a fascination with the boxing culture in Cuba. It's a nation that rears some of the best amateur boxers in the entire world on an astoundingly consistent basis. "El Chacal" is quick to give credit where it's due when discussing the intense and highly organized training methods he grew up with. "Boxing in Cuba amongst some of the best talent made it possible to learn a lot about the sport from other boxing legends on the Cuban National Team," he said. "It gave me the experience and work ethic I bring with me into the gym every day."

Despite his seeming quiet nature in public, Rigondeaux has a dramatic side. One might assume that his nickname is simply an homage to the predator, a fairly commonplace style of nickname among fighters; but Guillermo has different ideas. "It was given to me in Cuba during my amateur boxing career," he said. "The nickname Chacal represents a creature which is half man, half beast, something very supernatural. I relate it to the immortality that many fighters in my division believe I have and are afraid to get in the ring with me."

Indeed, Rigondeaux has proven to be one of the most avoided fighters in the sport. After his career-defining bout versus Donaire, all attempts to get the other champions in the division into the same ring were futile. But Rigondeaux has continued to pursue, and has fought the best possible contenders and previous champions. Those who do get in the ring with "El Chacal" often seem surprised once the fight begins at just how good he is.

"I have spent my whole career being underestimated," explained Rigondeaux. "From Nonito Donaire to every other fighter that has claimed they can stop me. It's always big talk that many opponents have before the fight that they think they can do what no one else has done. There is a Cuban saying, 'Dogs that bark loud have no bite.' Everyone believes they can not only do it but do it easily. It's gratifying when my hard work pays off and shows in the ring. When I show up and hit my opponents a few times, it makes them really reconsider the choice they made to step in the same ring with me."

When analyzing Rigondeaux's fights, it's clear from his opponents' reactions that the Cuban has exceptional power for his 122-pound frame. Several of his foes react by clamping up, largely refusing to throw punches out of concern over what's coming back at them. Some who have been overly critical of Rigondeaux's ability to entertain don't seem to understand that it

takes two fighters to make a good fight. “Once most of my opponents feel my power in the first round they stop engaging in the fight and start defensively keeping their distance from me,” Rigondeaux said. “A lot of the criticism about me being a boring fighter comes from my power—when opponents get a feel for it, they run away and stop engaging.”

When Rigondeaux’s opponents stop throwing, it’s common to hear their trainers pleading with them in the corner between rounds to let their hands go. But when the next round begins, it’s more of the same. “They start to back away and can’t handle being countered, so they stop throwing punches and run around the ring defensively, which is why so many times my opponents’ cornermen start demanding they do something in the fight since they have no other answers on how to stop me. They stop throwing punches, make it a one-sided fight.”

From the masterful Cuban fighter’s perspective, this response from his opponents is more frustrating than it is for any viewer. “It’s extremely frustrating to see when my opponents stop engaging in the fight,” Rigondeaux said. “I want them to come forward and bring me their best to give boxing fans an exciting show. This is prizefighting—it’s not fair to have fights where an opponent may not be throwing and engaging in the bout after a few rounds of feeling powerful shots. It makes bad one-sided fights. We need exciting fights in boxing and we need the best to fight the best, and that is at a level where both fighters are coming forward with everything they have.”

The few opponents who have continued to display aggression have paid for it dearly: Hisashi Amagasa retired on his stool after the 11th round, with a horribly swollen and bruised face (he was rumored to have had his jaw and orbital bone broken); and James “Jazza” Dickens was stopped in the second round from a broken jaw caused by a punch.

“Power is in the puncher. I have a big punch for a guy my size—I have more power than a lot of people bigger than me in heavier weight classes. When I hit Dickens I was surprised he was able to take a punch like that and still be standing,” Rigondeaux explained. “That’s when I wasn’t sure if the punch was damaging enough to end the fight. Same thing with Amagasa, I wasn’t able to see how much more punishment he was able to take until he got back to his corner and the corner had to call the fight over. I have great respect for Dickens as well as Amagasa, guys in my division that are warriors and want to fight big names.”

As far as which bout was his most difficult to date, Rigondeaux’s answer may not be what you’d expect. “I would say the Amagasa fight was one of my most exciting fights, and may [have] appeared to be my toughest fight. After going after him so many rounds, he was able to land a punch on me that knocked me down. He knocked me down twice! Amagasa is a true warrior and I have great respect for him. I was able to come back and counter him throughout the late rounds. This is an example of giving fans the best fights when both fighters come forward to bring what they have.”

Students of the fight game recognize the exceptional skill that a boxer like Rigondeaux displays in the ring, though sometimes it can be difficult to say whether it’s speed, reflexes, or a mental quickness—or a combination—that help give him such an edge over his foes. Guillermo describes it relatively simply, but it’s a loaded simplicity; while the concept is straightforward, the ability to master it is not. “It’s all about timing, especially for fighters like me which specialize in counter punching. I wait for my opponent’s critical mistakes to capitalize upon them.”

An intriguing tactic on display by Rigondeaux in the ring is that he periodically “shows” his opponent his upcoming combinations, almost in slow motion, before throwing them. It’s highly unusual, yet somehow he still successfully lands these punches, which is even more impressive. “Usually [it] comes when I’m going to counter punch. I get distance and timing

from measuring my opponents in the ring,” explained Rigondeaux. “Once my opponent throws a punch I capitalize by countering his offense. I’ve been told that many find it surprising that I show my opponent the punches in slow-motion and follow with the same combination, and land each punch even when my opponent knew what was coming.”

Which fighters does a master of the craft like Rigondeaux enjoy watching, and who inspires him as a fighter? “I always enjoy watching my fellow Cubans fight. I enjoy the sweet science and boxers that demonstrate that they have both defense and offense to bring forward. Anthony Joshua really impressed me a few weeks ago with that awesome fight against [Wladimir] Klitschko. A really good fighter I enjoy seeing and I consider top pound-for-pound boxer is Andre Ward.”

When away from home, sometimes it’s the most basic comforts we miss the most—like food. Since Rigondeaux lives in Miami, though, with its large Cuban population, he doesn’t miss authentic Cuban food like he no doubt would if he lived in some other part of the US. “There is a lot great Cuban food in Miami. I like Versailles—it has great Cuban food that has an authentic homemade cooking taste. My favorite Cuban food is Bistec con Arroz y Frijoles (Steak with Rice and Black Beans).”

Guillermo “El Chacal” Rigondeaux faces WBA interim titleholder Moises “Chucky” Flores (25-0, 17 KOs) on Saturday, June 17 on the undercard of the highly anticipated Andre Ward vs. Sergey Kovalev 2 rematch at Mandalay Bay in Las Vegas. The card will be broadcast live via HBO pay-per-view starting at 9:00pm ET/6:00pm PT.

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