

Ward: A Champion After God's Own Heart

Andre Ward beats people up for a living. But just because he is a born-again Christian doesn't mean he has to repent for his fighting.

As the undisputed WBA/WBC/*Ring Magazine* Super Middleweight boxing champion of the world, and as a child of God, Ward knows his motives are pure every time he steps into the ring. He is simply doing the job with which the Lord blessed him.

"It's a heart condition," said the 28-year-old Ward, who will defend his title against light heavyweight champ Chad Dawson in Ward's hometown of Oakland, Calif., on Sept. 8—a fight that will be televised by HBO Sports. "If I truly was honest with myself and I intentionally and permanently wanted to hurt someone, then that would be a problem.

"If I did that, I don't think God would be pleased with me at all, and I know he certainly wouldn't bless me if I had that attitude. It may sound like an oxymoron, but I don't have a heart to hurt anyone in the ring. I always pray for myself, my opponent and for our families' sakes that neither one of us gets hurt during a fight. That's only one of the reasons that God has blessed me so much in my life."

A Unique Nickname

Ward has myriad reasons to feel that way. Not only is he on top of the boxing world in his division with three titles around his waist, he is undefeated as a professional at 25-0. The former Olympic gold medalist also was named *Sports Illustrated* and *Ring Magazine's* Fighter of the Year for 2011.

More than anything, however, he cherishes his status as a successful athlete that has allowed him to become an effective witness for Jesus Christ and a role model for youngsters. His

mantra . (Son of God), which is prominently displayed on his trunks, is something he borrowed from Galatians 3:26, which states: "For all of you are sons of God through faith in Jesus Christ."

"That is only one of the Scriptures that I use to base my nickname from," Ward said. "It's self-explanatory because it releases your faith in Jesus, that you can be a son of God, irrespective of gender. Terminator or Destroyer weren't names that were going to fit me. . was simply a natural fit.

"As far as the Scriptures go, however, I would say that 2 Corinthians 12:9-10 is the story of my life. I never felt like I was the most-gifted or most-talented athlete. But I feel like if I put the work in and I do my part to keep God first, His grace would always be sufficient for me. His power shows up in my weakness. That's a factor that really keeps me humble."

Strong Fatherly Influence

Ward has been a child of God since he was 9. His father, Frank, himself a former light heavyweight boxer, introduced him to Christ.

"My dad took me to church and he explained to me what it meant to be saved," Ward said. "I accepted Christ into my heart. At that time, I was a young kid and didn't know how often you had to do it. I'd go up periodically in children's church just to make sure it stuck.

"But, early on in life, my dad did a tremendous job of giving me and my brother Jonathan a foundation for Jesus. It has truly stuck with me."

A Burgeoning Career

Ward started boxing at age 10 in 1994 and fashioned a record of 115–5 as an amateur. From 1998 to 2004, he didn't lose a match, becoming the U.S. National middleweight champion in 2001 and 2003.

Frank Ward, however, didn't get to see Andre win his gold medal in the Olympics in Athens, Greece, in 2004. He didn't get to see his son fight professionally, either. He died in 2002 at age 46 of a heart attack.

"My dad was the strongest man in the world in my opinion. So, I wondered how he was gone," Andre said. "In my mind, he is supposed to be here."

Determined to carry on his father's legacy as a strong Christian, Ward dedicated his life and career to the Lord. In his professional debut in December 2004, he defeated Chris Molina in the second round by a technical knockout.

Ward was so impressive in his next 14 fights that he secured a WBO/NABO Super Middleweight title bout with Jerson Ravelo in June 2008. He won by a TKO in the eighth round.

"When you first get that call that you're going to get a title shot, it's pure joy because it means you've finally broken through," Ward said. "To accomplish that goal and then actually win the title, man, it's amazing. It's something that can never be taken away from you no matter what you do the rest of your professional career."

After four WBO/NABO title defenses, Ward earned an opportunity to fight for the WBA Super Middleweight championship. In his own hometown in November 2009, he defeated Mikkel Kessler to win the crown with an 11th-round technical decision.

He went on to win the WBC and *Ring Magazine* Super Middleweight championships in December 2011 in the SHOWTIME Super Six World Boxing Classic Final with a 12-round unanimous decision over Carl Froch.

Trainer Virgil Hunter

When Frank Ward passed away, Virgil Hunter, Andre's trainer, took it upon himself to become Andre's mentor, both athletically and spiritually. Hunter wanted to ensure that

Frank's hopes and dreams for his son would be realized, and that he stayed on a straight path.

"Without a doubt, Andre's father laid a strong spiritual foundation for him to follow," Hunter said. "As a Christian, it was given for me to add to the foundation that Frank was building. By the time he passed, the mold was set, and Andre continued to blossom from there.

"Andre truly loves God and has a desire to please Him. That desire is overflowing from his heart and his soul. That's what makes him special at this stage in his life. You can see it in him as a parent; you can see it in him as an athlete; and you can see it in him as a future leader. He will be a leader in the future no matter what capacity he is in."

Going to the Well

Ward and his wife, Tiffiney, and their four children, Andre Jr. (11), Malachi (9), Amira (3) and their new baby, Micah (born in June) faithfully attend The Well Church in Dublin, Calif. The church is pastored by former Oakland Raiders running back Napoleon Kaufman, who went into the ministry in 2003 after retiring from football.

Among other capacities, Ward serves as an usher and an altar worker at The Well Church.

"Dre is such a blessing. The media really needs to promote a guy like him because he is such a great example for kids today," said Kaufman, who spent six seasons with the Raiders and rushed for nearly 5,000 yards during his career. "In the eight years that I have known him, I have seen him mature tremendously as a Christian, as a man, a husband, a father and a servant of God. He's a tremendous blessing to our church."

As a former athlete, Kaufman knows well the lure of worldly pleasures that are available to him. Ward has been able to skirt the temptations just as Kaufman did.

“He has such a great support system around him,” Kaufman said. “Dre has a lot of advisers, including Virgil Hunter, that keep him grounded. He listens, and he understands that there is no bigger star in this world than Jesus.

“Dre is a God-fearing man that refuses to compromise his character. Being in the limelight hasn’t gotten to him. He’s letting his light shine before men. He is very confident in his identity.”

Indeed, humility appears to be one of Ward’s stronger characteristics. While the world may think he has every reason to be cocky and arrogant, he has not allowed his fame and fortune to go to his head.

Even high praises from boxing great Sugar Ray Leonard, one of the greatest the sport has ever seen, weren’t enough to make his ego swell. Leonard has been quoted as saying, “Without question, Andre Ward is a winner.”

“I really appreciate that,” Ward said. “I haven’t accomplished a fraction of what Ray has as a professional. For him to give me some sort of positive feedback, it really means a lot. I cherish those words, but I have to keep pushing forward and working hard.”

A Proud Olympian

Ward recently spent time in London at the Olympics. No American fighter won a gold medal in London, and Ward remains the most recent American to win gold.

“For me, that’s bittersweet,” Ward said. “It’s obviously sweet that I’ve won my gold in representing my country in 2004. It was a 10-year goal just to reach the Olympics, and to get there and win was unbelievable. I don’t think it’s anything that will ever be superseded, even in my professional career.

“But, it’s bitter because I feel like the United States of America has some of the best talent in the world. We need to

figure out where the holes are in our game and tighten those things up so that the U.S. can be a force to be reckoned with in boxing as it once was.”

Temporary Setback

After winning the undisputed super middleweight title in 2009, Ward tore his ACL in a pick-up basketball game. His first thoughts were filled with the fear that his boxing career was finished.

But, realizing that God is the ultimate healer, Ward turned to Isaiah 53:5: “But He was wounded for our transgressions; He was bruised for iniquities ... And by His stripes, we are healed.”

“I knew God wasn’t finished with me yet,” Ward said. “We found a great surgeon, and I was back in literally five months. I didn’t lose anything; any agility, any speed. Obviously, I’m here for a reason, and that’s what fuels me to keep doing what I’m doing.”

Quiet Time With God

Ward doesn’t have any pre-fight rituals. As a Christian, he doesn’t believe in superstition; he doesn’t have a rabbit’s foot nor does he carry a four-leaf clover.

Routinely, once he has taken care of his pre-bout media obligations, Ward returns home from training camp to spend time with his family and with the Lord. His most relaxing and enjoying time is taking simple walks and talking with God.

“I just let Him know how dependent upon Him I am, and how much I need Him,” Ward said. “I want Him to know how thankful I am to be doing what I’m doing. I encourage myself in the Lord by reading His Word daily. That’s very important to me.”

Leaving a Lasting Legacy

Ward believes he still has not hit his prime as a professional boxer. But he also knows that his championship reign—and his

career—are in God's hands and that that both could end at any time. Dawson is 31-1 as a professional and won the WBC and *Ring Magazine* light heavyweight titles in April.

"I believe Andre has much more to go. This is just the beginning," Hunter said.

No matter what happens on Saturday, however, Ward believes God is firmly in control of his destiny.

"I know my career is still going strong. But I also hope that people can say, when it's all said and done, that I fought and was successful against the best in the world while never doing anything to disrespect the sport of boxing," Ward said. "I would hope that people would say that I was a class act inside and outside the ring. I never want to be a fighter that anyone can say never reached his potential because he didn't give it all he had.

"But most of all, I want to be someone that God is pleased with daily. I'm not a perfect individual and I truly want to do things the right way, God's way. I want to be someone who gives his best and does everything in his power to live according to the Word. If I do that, then I won't have anything to apologize for."