

CHAPTER NINE

THE DRAGON OF INSIGNIFICANCE

"Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education alone will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent. The slogan 'Press On' has solved and always will solve the problem of the human race."

- John Calvin Coolidge

Justin Blair held a charity event under the Friday Night Fight's banner on November 2, 2009. He invited me to come down and watch. In the main event, Sean Hinds, a British fighter living in New York, was fighting an old adversary of mine, Alex Ricci. Hinds was a reputable and respected fighter well versed in the art of Muay Thai. He traveled all over the world to compete and was climbing the middleweight ranks.

The Hinds and Ricci fight interested me for many reasons. As a fan I knew they'd put on a good show. As a fighter who lost to Ricci, I was curious how Hinds would fair against him. And in the back of my head I was hoping to meet Hinds in the ring one day. Needless to say I sat and watched with a keen eye. And Hinds made a statement from round one. He pummeled Ricci's leg with low kicks. Hinds caught Ricci with a hard straight right, dropping my former opponent. A fight's a fight, and I knew anything was possible. But Hinds' performance surprised me. Hinds went on to win the decision, having his way with Ricci for most of the fight. Ricci limped out of the ring. I couldn't help but watch in awe. Ricci was my dragon. And Hinds slew Ricci with ease.

After Hinds' performance at the charity event people started talking about the possibility of him and me fighting. After all, we were the two best middleweights in New York City. Die-hard fans wanted to see the fight. I wanted the fight. I knew Hinds would take the fight. But before Hinds fought on Justin Blair's charity event, he fought for Simon Burgess and Steve Milles or fought abroad. I headlined Friday Night Fights. I was loyal to

Justin so I couldn't fight Hinds under another promotion.

I kept putting the idea in Justin's head that I wanted to fight Hinds next. I wanted to fight the best. And Hinds was the man to beat. He was a worthy opponent and after seeing what he did to Ricci, fighting Hinds would be an incredible challenge. I waited and waited for an answer from Justin Blair. And then it happened. Justin sent me an email asking if I wanted to fight Hinds in 2010.

Hinds' team and my team both agreed on a fight date and purse. The event, which Justin Blair billed as the biggest Muay Thai show in New York City, was going to take place at the Lexington Armory in Manhattan. Two thousand five hundred people would attend. To top it off, the winner of the fight would be the first ever North American WKA Super-Middleweight Champion.

Word spread through the Muay Thai community that Hinds and I were going to fight. And it became the topic of debate at most gyms in New York City. Hinds, after all, had a powerful reputation and people thought I didn't stand a chance. I understood because on paper the fight looked easy for Hinds. I was the local fighter; he traveled the world. I was the underdog; he had the experience. I lost to Ricci in devastating fashion; he devastated Ricci. But I had something people hadn't added to the unbalanced equation—heart. My entire career I was the underdog. This is where I thrived.

Up until the moment I signed the contract to fight Hinds, I spent my career fighting off the out-of-towners who came to test my mettle in New York City. But this fight was different. Because after the final bell rang and the judges made their decision, neither one of us was returning home. New York City was our home. And only one of us would wear the middleweight strap. I kept playing the Ricci fight over and over in my head during training, but for the right reasons. Knowing Hinds beat Ricci didn't scare me. It fueled me. I had intentions now, and a game plan.

I was never a ball of energy before my fights. But like most fighters, nerves came and went. To offset the occasional bout of nerves I listened to music in the warm-up room. My fight with

Sean Hinds was no different, although my selection of music was. I popped in my ear buds and let the sounds of Salsa take my feet wherever they wanted to go. My mind drifted with the rhythms of the clave and the conga and the *campaña*. And I thought back to what I read about Bruce Lee, and how he was a proficient Cha-Cha dancer, and how his philosophies on self-expression gave meaning and purpose to my life as a fighter. Because fighting was one way for me to express myself, to express what “Mr. Classic” represented. And I represented the idea that you can hunt down your dreams, whether you’re stepping into an office or stepping into a ring.

The night closed in on the inevitable. And with each passing fight before mine, I became more hardened and ready for war. Jason wrapped my hands. And with a few fights left, he slipped the gloves over the casts on my fists and I knew my purpose. He pulled the laces tighter and wrapped them in knots. The gloves became extensions of who I was, extensions of my body, ready to inflict whatever damage I could to Hinds, but also extensions of my soul. In a way, they were the brushes I used to paint my masterpiece on the canvas of life.

The fight drew closer. I could smell the menthol from muscle liniment in the air and feel it burn in my lungs. I tried to stay hydrated by sipping water, but my mouth felt like I was chewing on sand. I shadowboxed to keep my body fresh. Jason, Jube, and the rest of my team sat without speaking, watching and thinking and waiting. Jason looked at me with the same smile he wore before each fight, a smile that stunk of nerves but rang with excitement. “You’re next, Chris.” The voice shouldn’t have come as a surprise, but it did. And the ring escort ushered us upstairs and into the doorway separating the hallway and the arena of Lexington Armory. “Wait here until your name is called,” he said.

I often wonder if my father had shown any interest in me, would I have turned out to be the person I am today? I can’t answer the question in good faith. But I do know growing up without his support or love made me feel insignificant. And since then, I’ve chased significance my entire life. Fighting was one way for me to find it. And I found it in the doorway of Lexington Armory. When the ring announcer called my name and the echoes

of his voice fell on my ears and the crowd erupted, I felt significant. When I took one step through the doorway, over the threshold of all that was and walked toward all that might be, I felt significant. And when I heard the chants of the crowd calling my name, calling out "CROM," calling out "Mr. Classic," again and again, I felt significant.

With my chest and my chin high and my spirit even higher I marched forward, moving through the crowd to the sound of the Conan the Barbarian theme song—my walkout music for each of my fights. "It's go time," I kept telling myself. "Time to prove who's best." We walked from the shadows of the Armory to the center of the arena; the ring and the reality drew closer, the lights brighter, the crowd louder. I made my way around the ring toward my corner. Fans in the front row pumped their fists, yelling, "You got this, Chris!" I nodded my head. I took a knee at the steps leading up to the ring and I visualized my ring entrance. I walked up the steps, climbed over the ropes, and footed myself in the ring, shuffling sideways. I made my way to the opposite side of the ring and turned to Hinds and gave him a pound.

"May the universe bring me victory and bring me safely back to my family and friends," I repeated as I walked to each corner and performed the wai kru. I felt the heat of the lights and the hold of the crowd's eyes upon me. I felt Hinds and his corner men watching me move. I often refer to this moment as the fight before the fight, the moment when the trainers and other fighter size you up. They look for flaws in your posture and composure. They look for signs of uncertainty. I say fighting is like the biggest lie, because you're trying to convince the crowd and your opponent and yourself that you're not nervous. In the fight you lie when you're hurt, hiding the pain. You lie when you're tired. But on the other end fighting is the ultimate truth. Fighting is the rawest expression of your mind, body, and soul. Whatever you lack gets exposed, whether it's timing, balance, skill, or courage. In the ring you face everything you conceal as a lie or believe to be true. And after the opening bell rang both Hinds and I would face our truths.

"Go out there and have fun," Jason said. After seven years of training and fighting together we knew we did the work in the

gym. Now it was about having fun. When the bell rang Hinds and I met in the middle of the ring and touched gloves. I attacked first, trying to send a message to Hinds that I meant business. For the better of two rounds we warred back and forth. And in the second round, he caught me. My legs buckled and straightened again. I told myself there'd be no way I was going down. This wasn't going to be a replay of my fight with Alex Ricci. I hid my pain and pressed on.

In the clinch I dominated Hinds and nullified his low kick attack. And when he threw his hook to my head and body I countered with one of my own. I started attacking his right side with my left kicks. I deterred him from being offensive. Once he slowed down I used my push kicks to keep him off balance. And toward the end of the fight, I landed a body kick, causing his mouthpiece to hang out of his mouth. He backtracked and I had him pinned against the ropes. I wasn't sure if he was baiting me. I popped my jab in his face for good measure.

The bell rang and I knew I did enough to win the fight. His boxing was good. But this was Muay Thai, and I did a better job of showing and landing all my weapons. But when fights go the distance and you leave them for the judges to decide you never know what to expect. Jason took off my gloves and I went to the center of the ring to wait for the announcement along with Hinds. David Diamante, the ring announcer, announced the first judge's score: forty-nine to forty-six for me. He announced the second judge's score: forty-eight to forty-seven, in favor of Hinds. We waited and the tension rose. David Diamante read the last scorecard. "And forty-eight to forty-seven, to your winner, by split decision, and the new WKA Professional North American Men's Muay Thai Super-Middleweight Champion," he paused, "Chris, Mr. Classic, Romulo!"

If having my name called out before I walked to the ring made me feel significant, then having my name called out as the new super-middleweight champion made me feel extraordinary. Not because I won, and not because I won a title or New York City bragging rights, but because, for that moment, I won a fight much bigger than the one taking place in the ring. For the first time in my career I looked over and saw Jube crying tears of joy. I

was to Jube what my father never was to me. I picked up my son, and with him sitting on my arm, we walked around the ring, him raising his hand, and me raising mine.