

## DAVEY LEE ARMSTRONG: THE AMBIDEXTROUS WONDER

By Austin Killeen



Unlike most newborns, when Davey Armstrong entered this world he wasn't alone. His travel companion was twin brother Dennis. The siblings drew their first breaths on June 9, 1956 in Tacoma, Washington. This meant Ivy Armstrong would be a very busy mother as she had one year old Frankie, in pampers, waiting at home. Less than two years later she added still another little boy, Alfred to her expanding clan. I hope she got a discount on pampers, as she was buying them faster than the store could put them on the shelf.

With four high energy youngsters under foot, Mrs. Armstrong needed an outlet for her quartet. The Tacoma Boys Club would soon become the answer to her prayers. Under the guidance of Joe Clough, they quickly became involved with football, basketball and baseball. Apparently Joe Clough wore many hats as he coached all three teams. This was a surprise to me as I only knew about his exploits as a boxing coach having produced such standouts as; Ray Lockridge, Sugar Ray Seales, Johnny Bumphus, Dale Grant and Leo Randolph.

In 1966 Davey and twin brother Dennis followed older brother Frankie into amateur boxing competition. Not even weighting 100 lbs. soaking wet, the brothers were brought along slowly. Apparently this nurturing process paid off, as the Armstrong's all developed impressive skills while working on canvas. Among his early exploits, Davey captured the National Junior Golden Gloves Title. Did I mention, by this time, that baby brother Alfred was also boxing under the guidance of Joe Clough? With so many promising amateurs competing at the boy's club it's easy to see why any hard working youngster might make an impressive advancement.

During our interview I was surprised to learn that baby brother Alfred split two fights with Aaron Pryor in the amateurs. I was curious as to what happened to the youngest Armstrong, as I was beginning to think I was interviewing the wrong brother. It seems that Pryor was awarded a trip to participate in an international competition after the two fights with Alfred. The youngest Armstrong was given a polite pat on the head and told job well done. Dissatisfied with his treatment by the amateur officials, little Alfred decided to pursue other activities.

By 1972 Davey had shown tremendous progress in the junior division of the amateur boxing circuit. A few months shy of turning seventeen, Armstrong was not eligible to compete in the senior division. Creative writing on his application soon solved that problem, if not his confidence. "I can remember the day," recalled Tacoma Boys' Club boxing mentor Joe Clough, "when David said he wouldn't fight senior because he felt the guys were too tough. I used to take the kids to the Golden Gloves and they would cringe when they saw fighters who looked so tough in the ring."

Despite his concerns regarding the level of competition at the senior level in amateur boxing, Davey didn't cave into his fears. Along with his much heralded teammate Sugar Ray Seales, Armstrong captured the national AAU championship at Fort Worth, Texas in 1972. Davey captured the 106 pound title and Seales won at 139 pounds. As a result they were invited to the U.S. Olympic Training Camp at Bear Mountain, N.Y. Armstrong was impressive in scoring a decision over Chris Flores of Roswell New Mexico. He then defeated Air Force sergeant Chico Rivera, the 1971 International Military games champion. Seales success was no surprise as he was regarded as one

of the top amateurs in the country. But predicting that the shy youngster from Tacoma would also qualify would certify you as a licensed clairvoyant.

At the U.S. Olympic Training Camp, the Tacoma duo both captured a spot on the U.S. eleven man team. Showing surprising power, Armstrong notched a technical knockout over 106 pound opponent Marine Cpl. Clarence Jones of Tyler, Texas in the waning moments of the third round. After a close first round, Davey started firing some heavy artillery in the second, scoring two knockdowns. Overpowering his opponent in the third, the referee was forced to rescue the defenseless Jones.

“That’s the sharpest David has ever looked,” reported Joe Clough who attended the finals. “He’s never had much of a knockout punch, but he had it tonight. “I felt strong, and I knew I was going to win,” Armstrong, a Rogers High School junior-to-be said. “I knocked him down with the right hand both times.” Armstrong drew praise from telecaster Howard Cosell and champion Muhammad Ali. Ali told David he gave the fans a great show and Cosell told him “I’ll see you in Munich. David in only his first year of senior competition had a career record of 81-10. Armstrong’s last loss was in the national Golden Gloves tournament in April.

The youngest member of the 1972 Olympic boxing team, Armstrong was in awe of his surroundings in Munich, Germany. His biggest problem was making weight, as he was five to seven pounds over the 106 pound limit on a daily bases. Historically, the U.S. has done poorly in the lower weight divisions in Olympic competition. We have half starved teenagers fighting grown men at their natural weight. If he was nervous before his opening bout, it didn’t show. Utilizing his superior reach and height, Davey won a convincing decision over Airf Dorgu of Turkey.

His next opponent was Enrique Rodriguez of Spain. The Spaniard, standing at just over five feet, was giving away six inches in height to his American rival. For Rodriguez, 106 pounds was his natural weight and he proved too strong for Armstrong. In our interview Davey stated; “I just couldn’t keep him on the outside. I had no problem with the decision, I lost.”

The Munich games will be forever remembered for a hostage situation. Members of the Israeli Olympic team were taken captive and eventually killed by a Palestinian group calling themselves Black September. Members of Black September contended that Yasir Arafat’s Fatah organization secretly endorsed the operation. Fatah, however, disputed this.

By the end of the ordeal, the kidnapers had killed eleven Israeli Athletes and coaches plus a West German police officer. Five of the eight members of Black September were killed by police officers during a failed rescue attempt. The three surviving kidnapers were captured, but later released by West Germany following the hijacking by Black September of a Lufthansa airliner. Israel responded to the killings with Operation Spring of Youth and Operation Wrath of God, as well as a series of airstrikes and killings of those suspected of planning the kidnappings.

Talking about this brutal event, Davey stated; “We were scared because we didn’t know what was going on. There was increased security, so we were made to feel safe. However rumors were flying everywhere, and we probably knew less than people watching events unfold on their TV’s.” Even though he returned from Germany minus a medal, Armstrong had proven he belonged on the world stage of Amateur competition.

Although disappointed, the Washington State pugilist was not discouraged. He continued to enter amateur competitions with the hope of eventually landing a berth on the 1976 Olympic team. Gaining weight is normal for a growing teenager; Davey was now competing at 119 pounds. As he

matured his hitting power improved. 1973 he was National AAU Runner-up losing a decision to Mike Hess of Albany, Oregon in the finals. Commenting on the Hess fight, the very honest Armstrong said "I lost, he deserved the decision." It was around this time that Davey first started fooling around with switching from orthodox to southpaw and back again during a bout.

In March of 74, Armstrong's dreams of the Montreal Olympic were nearly snuffed out. Driving on a snowy freeway in Northern California, the camper van Davey was driving in flipped over. "I was asleep behind the driver. Sort of half asleep and I heard Mrs. Clough say 'slow down' Dave remembers." Trapped under the van, Davey suffered third degree burns to his right foot. The boxing team was about 50 miles south of the Oregon border, returning from a successful invasion into Nevada. His foot injuries required three skin grafts before healing. It was several months before Davey could even began light training, as to do more would have risked further injury to the damaged foot.

Fully recovered from his accident, Davey left little doubt winning both the National AAU Championship at 125 pounds and gold at the Pan American games. Competing at the Pan Am Trials in Madison, Wisconsin, Armstrong scored a unanimous decision over Howard Davis of New York. When I first read the newspaper clippings, I couldn't believe it. I figured it had to be another Howard Davis of the same name. Calling Davey on the phone confirmed it was indeed the Howard Davis, gold medal winner and most valuable boxer of the 1976 Olympics. When I asked him why he didn't mention this fact during our interview, he responded "I must have forgotten." In the dictionary next to the word humble is a picture of Davey Armstrong. Did I mention his picture is also next to the word modest?

He started 1976 as a man on a mission, who wouldn't be denied. If there were any doubters, winning the National AAU Championship at 125 pounds and the National Golden Gloves title in the same division erased all doubts. He continued to mow down the competition during the Olympic Trials. In his bout with John Pletle of Jackson, Tennessee, Pletle's coach literally threw in the towel to concede victory in the third round.

"I got beat in my second fight at Munich and lost a bronze medal," recalled Armstrong, who had moved up to 125 pounds from 106 four years ago. "I figure I owe it to the, United States to go back and get a medal this year. I didn't put out as much as I should have four- years ago. I had a problem of being overweight and it took me four times to make my weight. A German woman at the house where my coach was staying kept feeding me cookies. I ate too many. I think she was trying to get me fat. I'm a lot smarter now," he added. "I'm now setting up my man instead of wearing him down."

Going to the '76' games in Montreal, the US squad was considered our countries strongest since 1952 when the Americans captured 5 gold metals. Clint Jackson, Sugar Ray Leonard, Howard Davis and Davey Armstrong all figured to have outstanding chances of bringing home the gold. Three other Americans were given medal chances; Charles Mooney, plus Brothers Michael and Leon Spinks.

Before the boxing portion of the Olympics even started, controversy struck. Several countries from Africa withdrew from the games for political reasons. As a result twelve boxers were awarded walkovers as their opponents were no longer at the Olympics. Some of the fighters had already received a bye as a result of an odd number of contestants entered in a particular weight class. This meant that one boxer could be boxing in the finals having only boxed twice while his opponent

could have boxed four times, in addition to having been placed in a more difficult talent pool. Olympic officials refused to have a re-draw and the games went on as scheduled.

Davey's first opponent was Anatoly Volkov of Russia. If there's such a thing as luck of the draw, then Armstrong's luck was all bad. Earlier in the year the Soviet had destroyed Davey in two rounds. In that fight, after a close opening round Volkov had dropped Davey twice in the second. Pinned against the ropes, Davey was taking a beating and not returning any fire. The referee stopped the bout to save him from further harm.

Another boxer might have been discouraged facing an opponent who had destroyed him just eight months earlier. But Davey Armstrong is not just another boxer. The usually quiet Armstrong communicated to Volkov that this time it was his turn to win. And win he did. Keeping the fight at long range behind an excellent left jab, Davey utilized his height and reach advantage to capture a unanimous verdict.

Tibor Badari of Hungary was the favorite to win gold at 125 pounds, and Davey's next opponent. Badari, two-time European champion, proved to be as tough as his reputation. Tibor was a smart boxer and a good counter-puncher. Throughout the bout Tibor did a good job countering Armstrong's left jab. But Armstrong got in enough rights and started to come on stronger in the second round. Davey appeared to be in control in the third. Once again the American won a unanimous decision, but the scores were all very close. "He caught me once pretty good, but I was never hurt," commented Armstrong after the fight.

Angel Herrera of Cuba was next for Davey. Sitting in his dressing room after the Badari fight, Armstrong watched Herrera in action on TV, disposing his rival. "I think I can whip him," Armstrong said. "He's just a puncher, but you have to be careful of them. They can hurt you."

One thing was for sure, a win over the Cuban would guarantee Davey at least a bronze medal.

From the opening bell it was boxer vs puncher and Herrera could punch. Boxing beautifully, Armstrong tried to keep the fight at long range. Good lateral movement by Davey made it difficult for the Cuban to sit down on his punches. As a result, Herrera would swing wide punches at Davey and then fall into a clinch. For his part, Armstrong kept throwing punches at long range to maximum his height and reach advantage. After three hard rounds, the combatants waited at center ring for the decision to be rendered. The first four judges were split with two votes going to each boxer. The deciding vote was cast by the Iranian judge who called it 59-59. As the fight couldn't end in a draw, he awarded the fight to Herrera apparently ~~of~~ for his aggressiveness.

Armstrong's loss was greeted with disbelief. Howard Cosell, the ABC commentator who is almost never at a loss for words, was able to only say: "Armstrong was robbed." Roland Schwartz, head manager of the U.S. team, was livid. "I've been an international referee for years," he said, "and I have never seen anything like this."

"Davey did just what he was supposed to do. He boxed the slugger. He fought the way you're supposed to fight in international fights. He should have been an easy winner under Olympic rules. The Cuban threw illegal punches. He was throwing roundhouse punches and hitting with the open hand. You can't do that under international rules. He should have been warned, cautioned and disqualified."

“This is my second time around in the Olympics,” Davey said, “and this is the second time they said I lost. I know I won it this time. I gave it everything I had in the third round. I just don’t understand it. The Cuban was strong, but he had no skills and he held a lot. He was just swinging wild ones.”

Returning home to Washington State, the disillusioned Armstrong weighed the options of turning pro or just giving up boxing altogether. Ultimately he decided to try for the 1980 Olympics and win a gold medal. Once again the youngster from Puyallup won National Golden Gloves and AAU titles at 132 pounds. In an international competition with host Cuba in 1978, Armstrong might have ~~had~~ won one of his most amazing performances against Jose Aguilar.

The much bigger Cuban manhandled his American opponent in the opening stanza. Davey had no answer for the bullying tactics of his opponent and the hometown referee didn’t interfere with the action. It didn’t look like the visitor would even finish the fight on his feet. In the second round Armstrong startled his opponent by switching to southpaw. Confused, Aguilar started eating right hand jabs. Suddenly the Cuban was wild with his punches and Davey was making him pay with hard counter punches. In the third Jose continued his reckless attack with the same unsuccessful results. The only surprise was the split decision, but unlike Montreal Davey was the victor.

Approaching the 1980 Olympics, Davey Armstrong was one of the outstanding amateurs in the world. But once again he would fail to capture Olympic gold. The 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan spurred President Jimmy Carter to issue an ultimatum on January 20, 1980 that the United States would boycott the Moscow Olympics if Soviet troops did not withdraw from Afghanistan within one month. When the Soviets remained in Afghanistan, America withdrew from the Olympics. For Armstrong his amateur career was over, having compiled 170 wins against 24 defeats against some of the best boxers in the world.

Starting as a ten year old, Davey had been boxing in the Amateurs for 13 years. Some experts feel if a boxer stays too long in the amateurs it becomes counterproductive. Qualities that lead to success at that level don’t necessarily translate to achievement in the pros. At the amateur level you are expected to fight hard for three or four rounds and boxers are often encouraged to sit on a lead if they are perceived to be winning by their corner. At the professional level, the ability to pace oneself over ten or twelve rounds is a far more valued skill.

In 1980 Armstrong elected to turn pro under the guidance of Emanuel Steward and train out of the Kronk Gym in Detroit, Michigan. By this time in his career, Steward had an excellent reputation as a trainer and a budding star in Tommy Hearns. The list of outstanding pro prospects training under Steward was close to twenty. This required Emanuel to be on the road with his boxers when they had a fight. Consequently this resulted in assistant trainers working with the boxers left behind. I have no idea how much one-on-one time there was between Armstrong and Steward. I do know that in our interview Armstrong only had good things to say about Emanuel.

As a pro Davey compiled a record of 24 wins and 3 losses in 27 fights. Fourteen of his victories came early and he was only stopped once. Watching his fight with Daniel Rivera held a great deal of drama, as Armstrong was coming off a KO loss to Agustin Caballero. When a promising boxer is coming back from a clean knockout defeat, their mental confidence is clearly in question. The boxing landscape is littered with talented boxers who never rebound.

Perhaps this is what Rivera wanted to find out when he exploded out of his corner at the opening bell. Armstrong remained calm, spending the first 30 seconds riding out his opponent's attack. When Daniel stepped back to catch his breath, Davey stepped in and closed the show with an overwhelming display of hitting power. After three years in the punch for pay trade, Armstrong retired after losing a 10 round decision to Steve Romero in San Jose, California.

Watching film of Davey, he clearly was a very gifted boxer, who could seamlessly switch from orthodox to southpaw and back again. Without question he was one of the best amateur boxers of the 1970's but for some reason his talents never transferred to the pros. Although he wasn't a murderous hitter, his combination punching overwhelmed opponents often leading to early endings. He was a skilled craftsman who could usually figure out any style.

Today Davey lives in a beautiful community in Puyallup, Washington. He has a beautiful daughter Latisha who is 25 years old. When I interviewed Leo Randolph two years ago, I felt like a dentist trying to pull information out of him. By comparison, Davey makes Leo sound boisterous.

It was a real pleasure meeting and spending quality time with Davey. He is a beautiful human being, and I am honored to call him a friend.



***Davey Lee Armstrong and Austin Killeen  
Seattle, WA. August 23, 2011.  
(Photo courtesy of Clay Moyle).***