

YURI FOREMAN

'Strong Ties'

By: Aliza Davidovit

To begin to unravel the mystery of Yuri Foreman, you'd have to pull at two strings, two strings which seem as incompatible as barbwire and silk that it's hard to believe they can weave into one consistent story. But they do, and it's an invigorating, inspiring, and sometimes bloody story where long-held dreams come true and new ones are being spun.



The first tug at a string will begin to unfasten the boxing gloves, the closest witnesses to the eight knockouts and 25 wins of this undefeated professional light middleweight champion. And when those gloves come off, there is something so innocent and sweet about Foreman that makes one feel protective of him, which is quite ironic because with just one power-packed punch, he can kill.

As the 28 year old boxer sits down to be interviewed, it soon becomes clear that his easy-going manner, playful personality and bountiful charm are as impactful as his punch, and his wit and mind are quicker than his jabs. As only a Jewish mother

would say, all those knocks in the head banged a lot of sense into him. “To be a good fighter,” Foreman explains, “I try and beat them in my head first as I did with Saul Román,” a power puncher from Mexico with 24 knockouts in 28 fights. Foreman beat the Mexican knockout champion on April 5th in a much anticipated fight-- with his Yiddisheh Kop—not to mention his lightening speed punches and good moves.

Yuri Foreman’s boxing career began at age 7 with the help of his mother. Born in, Belarus, Yuri’s first venture into the world of sports was as a swimmer. The macho boxer jokingly says that he didn’t pick ballet as did many of his Slavic compatriots because he didn’t think he’d look good in a tutu. But his swimming career came to an early belly flop when he was beat up by some older boys at the pool. He had also been the victim of anti-Semitic slurs. Yet, early on he developed his non-defeatist mentality when his mother brought him to a boxing gym where it was love at first punch. His innate talent was evident. The next time the pool bully crossed Yuri’s path and tried to hassle him, he was out of luck. Yuri put all his training into motion and punched him out. Justice was served and the first KO was under his belt.

The lesson was as clear for Yuri Foreman then as it is today. “Everyone sees Jews as wimpy lawyers or accountants or weak,” Foreman says. “We need to get back the tough image for Jews --not to go looking for fights but to be ready for them.” He equates it to having a strong Israel and not letting anyone push Jews around.

But Foreman didn’t create the tough Jew-boy image. Jewish fighters such as Benny Leonard, Lew Tendler, Abe Attell, Ted Lewis, Barney Ross, Joe Choyinski and Maxie Rosenbloom ranked among the greatest fighters of all time. In fact, more Jews have participated in boxing than in any other professional sport. By the late 1920s they accounted for almost one third of all title contenders.



Foreman too, since childhood, wanted to be a contender. When his family emigrated to Israel in 1991 he was eager to continue boxing. The first question his new trainer asked him was: "What do you want from boxing?" Foreman replied, "To be world champion."

Training in Israel was hard, in place of a real gym, a makeshift one was setup outside under the unmerciful Mediterranean sun with sparse equipment and a few pairs of frayed beaten gloves. Part of the training included running on the beach for hours carrying stones until their hands bled. Foreman would also often spar with Arab boxers who were only too happy to punch a Jewish boy with impunity. Perhaps it was those grueling conditions that bolstered a champion, that training camp of hard knocks that not even a Rocky film producer could fathom.

Nonetheless, Foreman honed his skills. He became known for his quick reflexes and constant movement. As an amateur boxer, in Israel, he won three national championships. But at the age of 19, the reach of his punch and dreams took him beyond the tiny Jewish homeland. "I came home one day and told my father I want to leave Israel" Foreman shares. "I wanted to be a some body."

In 2000 Yuri Foreman moved to New York City. And though it was a little grayer than the sunny homeland he left behind, it still felt like home. In Russia, he had felt like a second class citizen because he was a Jew, in Israel he felt like a second class citizen because he was a Russian. but in New York, the melting-pot mentality welcomed him like a warm embrace and opportunities abounded.

In conjunction with a full time job, he started training vigorously at the famous Brooklyn gym, Gleason's. His dedication paid off. By 2001, he won the New York Golden Gloves 156 pound Open Class. His overall amateur record was 76-5. After his win at the Gloves and having served as sparring partner to many pros, he was ready to go pro. He did so on January 24, 2002 on a New York City card. Winning with a first round TKO over Israel Felix, he was spotted by Lou di Bella who became his promoter for his next ten fights, all wins. Today he has a new promoter and is managed by Alan Cohen and Murray Wilson. In 2003 Foreman married Leyla Leidecker, a stunning blonde Hungarian model and herself a featherweight amateur boxer who later converted to Judaism. And if it's true that boxers can't have sex before a fight, by the looks of Leyla—that's got to be tough-- no wonder he remains undefeated.

And then there is the other string we have yet to pull upon, the string that binds him to an ancient religion, his Tzizzit, which he lets dangle freely in full sight. Yuri Foreman may very well be the only boxer in the world who ties his Tefellin knot every morning and ties his boxing gloves at noon, and here's the total knockout---he is also studying to be a rabbi.

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When he hit that pavement in New York working toward what he'd become, he began to feel longings for what he already was, a Jew. He reached out to a Chabad Rabbi who would set his feet upon a new road. His interest in Judaism grew and in conjunction so did his observance of the Halachik laws. For certain, he will never fight on a Shabbat or Jewish holidays.

Foreman rejects the notion that boxing is incompatible with Jewish values. Yet, which string really reveals the "fiber" of Yuri Foreman. Is he the boxer with the power to kill who is now training for his next fight or the handsome charming young man training to be a rabbi? After pulling a few strings, it's become clear to me that he is genuinely both. And for now, there is nothing at all about this soulful stalwart mensch that is set to unravel.
