

Vinnie Ryan – Sport History Project

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Vinnie Ryan who heads the McGrory's boxing club in Hamilton, Ontario is a well known boxing coach in Canada. The Hamilton coach has built a solid reputation over the years in the boxing community as a winner. He was inducted into the "legends" section of Boxing Ontario due to the tremendous success of his students. Unsurprisingly, he has many "best coach" awards under his belt. The most recent includes the 2005 Hamilton coach of the year and 2006 Boxing Ontario best coach of the year award.¹

In fact, Vinnie Ryan's coaching skills were put to a test recently when he coached McMasters own Stuart Boyd, representing McGrory's boxing club, who weighed only 69kg. Boyd and nine other fighters battled each other in a grueling tournament. In his first fight, Boyd battled with Bob Potter of Niagara Falls Boxing Club. Although the initial strategy was a conservative one, Boyd's strategy was to remain patient, keep Potter at a distance and selectively choosing his shots before handing a handful of flurries in the final minutes of the match and snatching the win.

Under the wings of Vinnie Ryan, Boyd went on to become the 2006 Junior National Champion and in 2007 won the gold medal in the 75 kg division. Due to Ryan's attitude of performance and results doing the talking, he is rarely seen in any media as he never attempted to hog the limelight. Hence, the best way to understand more about

¹ Boxing Ontario, (April 23, 2007). 2007 Annual Boxing Ontario Awards. Retrieved March 19, 2009, from Boxing Ontario Web site: http://www.boxingontario.com/web_pages/infocentre_Media.php?ID=72

Vinnie Ryan is to look at his students and what they have learned from Ryan and what they think of Ryan.²

The final match was a tough one for Boyd as he was facing Joshua Cameron, Windsor's armature athlete of last year. Cameron dominated his earlier fights in the tournament scoring comprehensive wins. In the match against Boyd, Cameron made sure he had the initial momentum by continually dominating Boyd in the initial rounds with aggression. Unlike Cameron, Boyd came to the game with a plan and was able to weather the aggression and beat Cameron in an exciting finish. After the game, Boyd explained that his coach Vinnie Ryan gave him a game plan to go to the game maintaining a tight defense and to time his right hand over Cameron's pawing jab.

That strategy paid dividends for Boyd. This game was the hallmark of Vinnie Ryan's career. Ryan is not a pre-game talker nor is he a bragger. He rarely speaks to the media and so there is very little written about him by the press. He comes up with a strategy that he devises a unique strategy that changes from game to game and makes sure his student does not deviate from his strategy—even if the student was losing in the first couple of rounds. Vinnie Ryan's words are few and far between, he believes in performance doing the talking.³

² Radley, Scott (January 11, 2007). These boots were made for boxing. Retrieved March 21, 2009, from The Hamilton Spectator Search Web site: <http://spin.mohawkcollege.ca/courses/piczakm/ryanranelli.htm>

³ Holbrook, Ben (November 20, 2008). McMaster student crowned Ontario boxing champion. Retrieved March 21, 2009, from The Silhouette Web site: http://www.boxingontario.com/web_pages/infocentre_Media.php?ID=72

Ryan Ranelli, son of boxing great Rick Ranelli absolutely despised boxing while growing up. However, during his teens, he regained his interest in the sport and enlisted in his father's boxing club in Sudbury B.C. For five long years he worked at getting better with marginal success. More than a few times he wondered why he was even bothering because the results were not showing. However, due to a chance discovery, he heard of Vinnie Ryan and learned about Ryan's reputation and ability to train amateur athletes to success.

Ryan Ranelli believed in himself and believed that he had the potential to achieve great things. One day, he just packed his bags and immediately moved from Sudbury B.C. to Hamilton, Ontario to join Vinnie Ryan's McGrory's boxing club. Five months later, he was Ontario champion and a month after that, he was the national champion after beating the defending belt-holder. He was at the top of his game and Vinnie Ryan's coaching prowess was proved once again to be invaluable.

However, during a freak event, at the Commonwealth trials, he tripped over a referee and twisted his ankle and thereby not fit to continue. Boxing Canada postponed the fight due to Ranelli injury. It wasn't until he was in Auckland, New Zealand en route to the Games in Melbourne that he learned a national sporting body had upheld his opponent's appeal and he was disqualified. Throughout this ordeal, Vinnie Ryan was surprisingly quiet and did not utter a single word and was thoroughly professional. It was in this tough time, Ranelli learned more from Ryan than ever before.

He explained that Vinnie Ryan taught him to remain calm and focused to reach his goals to make the 2008 Olympic team and the 2010 Commonwealth Games team. Ranelli learned from Vinnie Ryan his most important lesson and that was professionalism. Many other coaches would have lodged appeals and spoken inadvertently and hindered not only Ranelli's reputation but Canada's reputation to the international world. By cutting his losses and moving on, Ranelli was able to achieve more than by being angry and frustrated.

Vinnie Ryan's contribution to the community has been immense. For over 30 years, hundreds of kids from some of Hamilton's poorest families come to Vinnie Ryan's ramshackle gym to learn to box. For as little as \$25 a month, they get professional training. Many get the training for free if they are unable to afford it. Vinnie Ryan purchases the equipment from his own pocket. In addition, he lends his time virtually for free because many kids get in for free and even though the costs to manage the place outweigh the fees he charges his students, he has been doing it since thirty years.

Interestingly, Vinnie Ryan works five days a week full-time as a plumber and in the evenings he and his wife Val head to the gym to coach about forty to fifty students every evening. His sheer commitment to the sport as well as passion shows because he works more than twelve hours each day of the week.

Interview with Vinnie Ryan by Prahalad Ponna

My interview with Vinnie Ryan was an interesting ordeal. I did not know much about Ryan because I conducted the interview before I did sufficient research on him. I knew he was a well known boxing coach and that he won a few awards. Even though the interview was intriguing it was only after the interview when I could find out a few interesting things about him through a couple of his students and research that I could connect the dots.

Since Vinnie Ryan is busy almost everyday with his full time job as a plumber and has busy schedule training students, it is a tough task to interview him. This is further exacerbated by the fact that Ryan does not believe in hogging the limelight. He likes working in the background and doing his best to help the community.

Hence, I had the tough task to interview him within a short span of time. My first impression with Ryan was that he was very calm, composed and succinct in his responses. He rarely exaggerates when he speaks. When he can say something in two words he never uses three. As an interviewee, I could sense that because of this hectic schedule, he made sure he made use of every single minute to the best of his ability. His time management skills were impeccable because he gave me approximately thirty minutes the first time I interviewed him and at the stroke of the clock, he politely asked me to wrap up the interview.

Upon asking him why he was in the boxing world, he immediately said boxing was the most disciplined sport. He said to him, boxing was more about discipline, strategy and patience than violence. These traits he said made people better human beings once they got out of the boxing ring. Although I am not an avid fan of boxing, I still watched the sport sporadically. One thing I noticed immediately was the sense of calmness in Vinnie Ryan's voice. When I watched professional boxing on the television, I always saw the boxing coach as an aggressive, loud and someone who had a "take no prisoners" type of ruthless attitude. However, in the case of Ryan, I just could not believe his calmness and succinctness. My perception of boxing coaches changed immediately. I quickly understood why he was such a renowned boxing coach. It brought back memories of my childhood.

While growing up, I was intrigued by Japanese archery or Kyūdō. I was fortunate enough to meet a Kyūdō practitioner who repeatedly stressed that he practiced it not to fight someone or to even hunt. He said it portrayed a serene beauty that can only be sensed when you concentrate enough to accurately thrust the arrow where ever you wish. Vinnie Ryan's approach was surprisingly similar. He said to him, winning or losing did not matter. It was whether his students learned something from their defeat and followed their pre-game strategy without deviating too much and played to their strengths. Although Ryan trained thirty national champions, I found out that Vinnie Ryan's ultimate goal was not to train national champion boxers but rather train his students to be mentally and physically fit to face life's challenges. Ryan explained further that strategy was the

most important aspect of his coaching and the self improvement of his students while training under him was more important than winning.

This was further proven when I researched and found out that for the past thirty years hundreds of kids from some of Hamilton's poorest families come to Ryan's gym to learn to box for almost no cost. Ryan charges only \$25 per month and if any kid is unable to afford it, he coaches them for free. He explained to me that his goal was to give these kids the opportunity to learn discipline, get fit and become good enough to travel, see parts of the world they will never see or experience if not for boxing.

Upon asking him how the city of Hamilton has helped him achieve his goals, he said that the city-owned Normanhurst Community Centre on Barton Street East was given to him to train the kids. He thanked the city for their support and said he was grateful. However, upon further research I found out that Ryan was having trouble managing it because three other organizations held meetings at the same time when Ryan's students do running and other training activities. In fact, he purchased some of the equipment with his own money and pays some of the costs of maintaining the gym from his own pocket. It was here that I realized that he was truly a humble person who did not wish to burden the city's politicians who already had a myriad of problems on their hands. He silently does his job with the resources he has at his disposal showing great stewardship.

When I asked him what he thought about the new generation of boxing and where he thinks it will go in the future, he explained that he was not satisfied with the current glorification of violence that started with professional wrestling and has slowly crept into the boxing arena. He explained that breaking rules is becoming common these days and the once disciplined sport of boxing is turning out into a violent filled sport. He said this gives his students an edge because while their opponents are looking to be aggressive and look to lay as many power-punches as quickly as possible, his strategy is to defend, be patient and lay punches only when the opportunity arises. This way, his students would have enough stamina left to come on top in the later rounds.

A man of few words, he did not mention the fact that he represented Canada as a boxing coach numerous times nor did he boast about his awards. He mentioned that his wife Val Ryan who is the president of Boxing Ontario was a big motivation for him to continue coaching. His attitude of letting the performances do the talking while he does what he is good at –being a plumber during the day and a world-class boxing coach during the evenings. I was impressed by this dual role of fulfilling the responsibility of taking care of his family and doing his best to not let his skills as a coach go to waste by retiring from the sport. The most memorable moment was not a word uttered by him but rather an action, as soon as the allotted time he gave me was up, he immediately requested me to pack up and went on to go about his schedule without a single remark on the hectic day he was experiencing. It was as if he was born to do this and nothing could stop him from doing what he loves even if it meant that he had to make some sacrifices. He made me believe that true passion in something never dies in a person.

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