

JOEL DIAZ PROMISES TO MAKE PROVODNIKOV CHAMP AGAIN

Monte Carlo, Nov 4 – There was a moment, a few weeks ago, when trainer Joel Diaz knew he had made the right move in agreeing to coach former junior-welterweight champion Ruslan Provodnikov.

The likeable Russian, who knows only a smattering of English, raised his arms in the gym and bellowed, “I am champion! I am champion!”

Diaz called him over. “Ruslan, I promise I will make you champion again – if you listen.”

“Coach,” said Provodnikov, “I will listen. I will sleep on the floor of the gym if I have to. I’ll do whatever it takes.”

Boxer and trainer are now in Monte Carlo preparing to fight unbeaten Mexican Jesus Alvarez Rodriguez, who is officially 13-0, but claims to be 20-0, on the Golden Gloves tournament headliner on Saturday.

Diaz explained that the boxer had been anxious and frustrated that a number of big fights had been waylaid, but instantly switched into fight mode when promoters Rodney Berman and Art Pelullo did a deal.

Said Diaz: “His motivation shot up. We had a great camp. I was concerned that Ruslan was leaving Los Angeles for Indio, a small town. I wasn’t sure he would like it. But by week two he was smiling. He said he felt at home and really opened up.”

Diaz wasn’t tempted to reconstruct Provodnikov, who has built a huge fan base on account of his rugged, come-forward style. He took the view that the Russian had already built a career. He didn’t want to change him; he wanted to polish him and make

him better.

“He gets hit a lot, so I focus more on defence . . . head movement and some other tricks of the trade so he don't get hit so much. He wants to go for the kill, but blocks himself. It's hard for him to do offence-defence. I'm teaching him to use offence as defence.

“I'm not changing his style. We're working on making opponents miss, and counter-punching. He needs to put together more combinations and improve his workrate. I'm also working on making him a devastating body-puncher. He's reacted well; he's so good to work with.”

Although there are obvious language issues, Diaz says instinct has taken over. He demonstrates what he wants and tries to explain as best he can. Typically, Provodnikov shows his smarts by absorbing these lessons and demonstrating them in sparring.

“I'm excited,” says Diaz. “It makes my job easier. I was nervous after the first week and wondered if he liked my work. I know he does because he's a happy fighter and happy fighters always perform better.”

He likens his newest pupil to Julio Cesar Chavez sr, chiefly in their unstoppable styles, although Chavez was a master defence-wise. With more work, Diaz expects Provodnikov will improve in this area in the months to come.

Diaz has experienced some great nights working with a range of top fighters, among them Tom Bradley, Omar Figueroa, his brothers (Antonio and Julio), Felix Diaz and Diego De La Hoya, but one of his best career highlights was more prosaic.

Last year he orchestrated a dynamic performance from Juan Martinez, a warhorse with a 19-15 record, over hot favourite Alejandro Perez.

“You take a guy like Ruslan or Tim Bradley and the highest percentage of an outcome is the win. Anything can happen, but you’re at least 75 percent sure of the win. But when your guy is just the ‘opponent’ and he wins, that’s special.”

At the age of 42 and well entrenched a top trainer, Diaz says he couldn’t be happier. He trains champions and prospects alike, thrilling to the many rhythms of the fight game.

On Saturday, he expects to walk out as a winner. It’s what drives him.

Online reservations: <http://www.montecarloboxingbonanza.com/>

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Tel: (+377) 98 06 36 36

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FOR GOLDEN GLOVES

Clinton Van Der Berg: + 27 83 297 4677/

Clinton.Vanderberg@Supersport.com

FOR MONTE-CARLO SOCIETE DES BAINS DE MER

Eric Bessone +377 98 06 63 62 / e.bessone@sbm.mc

pressmontecarlosbm.com