

'El Abejón' Fortuna, Best Left Hook in La Romana

Javier a.k.a. 'El Abejón' Fortuna, the fourth world-boxing champ from La Romana still remembers his first fight when he was 12 and weighed just 65 pounds. It was at the Coliseo Romana, and his opponent was a boy named Manuel Trinidad who forced him to debut in the ring with a defeat, his first and last. The rematch was won by Fortuna. "We're not going to lose again," said his local coach Juan Ramirez after that first fight, almost a premonition of the success that awaited the young fighter. At just 23 years of age, El Abejón counts his fights in wins since his debut in 2009 in the featherweight class of the World Boxing Association (WBA). With 22 wins behind him, 15 of them by KO, he is one of the leading figures in boxing today in his own right. Along with Leoncio Mercedes, Julio Gervasio and Luis 'Cucuso' Santana, he is one of a small group of fighters from La Romana who have reached the pinnacle of the sport and is the latest on a list of 18 who have given a world champion's title to the Dominican Republic. Fortuna won the world title belt in December in Las Vegas by unanimous decision against unbeaten former world champion Patrick Hyland from Ireland on the undercard of the fourth Manny Pacquiao-Juan Manuel Marquez bout.

In April he lost his first title defense on the scale when he failed the 126lb division by 13 ounces. The fight went on and Fortuna beat challenger Miguel Zamudio with a devastating left hand in the first round that left his Mexican rival unconscious on the canvas. The climate and the absence of his coach Vicente de la Cruz, who did not make the flight with him to Atlantic City due to visa problems, affected the boxer's pre-fight training: "It was very disappointing; without my coach I didn't have the necessary care and control," says Fortuna.

Now he is determined to rise to the challenge of regaining the title. The first step will be on August 2 in the US versus Luis Franco, a Cuban former Olympian, and the fight will be broadcast by ESPN. "Depending on the outcome, Javier may have the option of regaining the title in November, when we have the next fight scheduled with HBO," says César Mercedes, better known as Mangüita,

Fortuna's manager since turning pro. Mangüita, also from La Romana, and his first coach Juan Ramirez are the main people responsible for the boxer's launch. It was Mangüita who christened him as 'El Abejón' – the bumblebee - "because of his fast movements and stinging punch" - and who took him to Santo Domingo on Ramirez's recommendation to carve out a career. "The combination of speed and punch, which is unusual in boxing, and a very strong left," said Ramirez, are the main qualities that both mentors saw and that make Fortuna so great in the ring.

Off the mat, his two children, family and his childhood friends in Villa Nazareth are his life. Fortuna has not changed much, despite his success: "He still does not realize the level he is at and how important he is as an athlete," says Ramirez. True to his origins, when in the country he can be found playing dominoes or softball on the San Carlos baseball pitch in the north of La Romana. In the neighborhood they watch all his fights live on TV in the street, near the family home, although his friends jokingly complain that they often do not have time to enjoy his fights because of the speed in which he knocks out his opponents. On the other hand, his mother Lydia Frances does not join in these parties. She never liked to see her son being hit. She fasts for a week before the fights and locks herself in her room to pray to God for her son. She only watches the TV when the fight is over. She remembers him as a child



Photo by Alfredo Esteban

Javier Fortuna during a training session at Coliseo Romana.

with a strong character, "at school he faced anyone regardless of size" – but who was always responsible towards the family and did odd jobs to help financially. Now Fortuna is rebuilding the house where he lived with his parents and six siblings, in exactly the same place: "I never thought one of my kids could go this far, we are humble and have experienced many hardships, but luckily we have God on our side." Her wish is to accompany her son to the United States one day, where Fortuna hopes to follow in the footsteps of idols like Floyd Mayweather and for his name to remain forever in the history of boxing.

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