



## Whatever His Hands Find To Do

Retirement had not been the plan. Ward was at the top of his game. In fact, he was a day away from publicly announcing a three-fight deal with HBO—a cherry on top of an unbelievable mound of victories.

But he felt overwhelmed and burdened. Maybe it was time to stop. Tears began rolling down his cheeks as he let the words come out. He thought it was time to end the boxing career that had consumed and propelled him for 23 years.

Ward wasn't accustomed to crying. He was used to winning. In the 13 years he'd been a professional boxer, he had never lost a single match.

### **A Look Back**

Ward grew up in the Bay Area of California, where his first love was baseball. But when his dad started telling him stories about his own amateur heavyweight career, it was game over. Ward wanted to be like his dad—a fighter.

There was plenty about Frank Ward not to emulate. He was a functional heroin addict: an engaged and well-meaning business owner and father, but one who couldn't slip or weave out of addiction, emerging blank and distant from his room. Ward wondered how the man he regarded as Superman could transform so entirely.



Ward's mother had already succumbed to her illness. She was a full-blown addict who lived on the streets for the better part of Ward's youth.

Ward used to wait for her to keep her promise to come home, watching out of his window. Sometimes, she would come back. But it was mostly to demand drug money from Frank Ward, not to see her son.

Nevertheless, Ward never saw himself as a victim. "I had real hardships around me, but I didn't grow up in the slums; I wasn't a kid who had absolutely nothing," Ward says. "I had a good family base even though my family had issues."

As a single dad, Frank Ward was a no-nonsense guy and the most important man in his young son's life. He took the 9-year-old Ward to Virgil Hunter, the man who would become his coach and godfather, and asked a question: "Can you teach my son how to hit and not get hit?" Hunter could, and he did.

## **Becoming the Best**

Though Ward couldn't have articulated it at the time, boxing was an escape. It didn't matter that his dad was back in rehab or that they really were losing the house this time. In the ring, as his body ached with effort and his ears rang, and his opponent's sweat rained down around him, he felt a sense of total peace.

Ward fought his first amateur boxing match when he was just 10 years old. He put everything he had and everything he was into the sport. And it showed. He went 115 and 5 in his amateur career and won a gold medal for the U.S. as a light heavyweight at the 2004 Olympics in Athens before turning professional at age 20.

Ward took on the fighting nickname S.O.G., short for "Son of God," a reflection of his deep Christian faith and spirituality.

From there, Ward's career was even more illustrious. He earned multiple world titles in middle and heavyweight classes and became known as the No. 1 pound-for-pound fighter in the world. He fought 32 matches. He never lost.

There were plenty of examples of kids who came from rough backgrounds to dominate boxing: Mike Tyson, Kassim Ouma, Dwight Muhammad Qawi. But from a young age, Ward noticed something about sports stars who managed to fight their way up to the top. They often plummeted swiftly back down to earth when the game was up.



“A lot of fighters come from nothing, get a lot of notoriety, prestige, money, and then it ends badly,” Ward says. “I knew I didn’t want to be a fighter that people could wag their finger and shake their head at and say, ‘Look what he once was.’”

Perhaps because of that awareness—that boxing would be something he did, not all that he was—Ward always had the end in mind. “I never tried to convince myself it was forever,” he says.

Ward promised himself that one day, when he decided to leave the sport, it would be at the apex of his career, when people would wonder why he was leaving, not cluck that he should have bowed out sooner.

In his penultimate fight, against light heavyweight champion Sergey Kovalev, Ward won a narrow victory. He spent the next three months doing nothing. He couldn’t convince himself to keep training. His desire was depleted. It felt like the end. His wife and his pastor, former Oakland Raiders running back Napoleon Kaufman, convinced him to put in one final effort. A rematch against Kovalev that would cement Ward’s legacy as one of the greatest fighters in the world.

Walking into the Las Vegas ring that June day in 2017, Ward felt the familiar fear wash over him. He had to go out in front of the world shirtless in a pair of trunks and fight another man. His mind skipped to the Sunday after the fight—the downcast faces of his disappointed family, the commentators blathering about Ward’s big loss, the headlines his critics would finally get to write: Ward Defeated!

He thought about the last time he had lost a fight, when he was around 14 years old. About the freezing Southwest flight home where he sat, shivering with his arms tucked into his jacket, feeling the loss as a cold, bottomless mix of anger, shame, and sadness. He’d never forgotten that feeling. And he never wanted to feel it again.

He didn’t have to. Even in the midst of that fight’s chaos, Ward felt ready. He felt peaceful. Ward beat Kovalev by technical knockout in the eighth round, holding on to his hard-won titles and clinching his fighting legacy. He was still on top.

So, three months later, when he dropped the ‘R’ word as Tiffiney rummaged in their San Ramon, California, closet, he felt an unburdening. It was time.

## **Mission Accomplished**

“As I walk away from the sport of boxing today, I leave at the top of your glorious mountain, which was always my vision and my dream,” Ward wrote in a web post entitled “Mission Accomplished.”

Now, it was time to avoid the fall.



Ward threw himself into his second act with all the ferocity and discipline he'd brought to the ring. The same intensity he brought to preparing for fights, training, his diet—now he brings it to what he calls his “post-career life,” a slew of broadcasting, business ventures, meetings, and mentorships.

“There’s a scripture that says whatever your hands find to do, do with all your might,” Ward says. “That’s what I’m trying to do, stay in attack mode.”

Ward is perhaps most prominently engaged as a broadcaster for ESPN. He'd moonlighted sporadically in a similar role for Showtime and HBO before his retirement. But last year, he became part of a three-man commentator team that regularly covers the sports network's biggest boxing events.

For this self-described perfectionist, the fear of making a mistake in front of thousands of television viewers never goes away. But overcoming fear is what Ward is trained to do. Now, instead of psyching himself up for a fight, he talks himself down. Instead of taking a deep breath and never letting it go, when the little red “on air” light comes on and a producer starts the countdown, Ward tells himself to drop his shoulders and exhale. Retiring from the ring has allowed Ward to dabble in other arenas, including acting, with a role in *Creed 2* and a gig hosting a reality boxing show created in part by Sylvester Stallone. He is on the board of advisors of a company called Everybody Fights, a boutique gym hybrid launched by George Foreman III that offers a boxing-inspired group fitness brand and an inclusive, empowering ethos.

Ward also runs his own clothing line, S.O.G. Sportswear. And he talks about his work as co-manager for Shakur Stevenson, a 22-year-old boxer from Newark who Ward says has been “an honor and a privilege” to help coach.

He also teamed up with Ike's Love and Sandwiches Chief Executive Officer Ike Shehadeh to open a franchise location of the restaurant in Ward's hometown of Hayward, California. (The Andre ‘S.O.G’ Ward sandwich is a hefty salami and provolone affair with a one-two punch of pesto and Caesar dressing.)

## **Paying It Forward**

Staying engaged in his hometown was important to Ward, and he's doing it with more than sandwiches. Ward says giving back to the community has always been important to him. Rather than donate to specific charities, Ward and his family try to be present for people who need them. “We’re just available,” he says of himself and Tiffiney. Whether it's feeding the homeless or donating a whole bunch of athletic shoes, “I try to be whatever I need to be when there's a need to be met.”

Ward shares his story, too. He's visited schools, juvenile detention facilities, and prisons to talk about his journey and the decisions he made that kept him on the path to greatness. From the sound of it, Ward hasn't made too many mistakes. But he always points out how close he was to throwing it all away during his tumultuous teenage years, when the lure of the streets was powerful and his

discipline ebbed.

His father's death in 2001 was an excuse to mess up, he tells the young guys he meets with. After spending a childhood training to be the best, Ward was sick of the routine: school, homework, gym, back home, rinse, and repeat. There was no hanging out, no lazing around, no daydreaming. "I gave up a childhood to get that gold medal, to get those championships," he says. "So, I went out there and did everything I didn't get a chance to do."

Ward calls it his season of rebellion. "I really almost lost it all," he says.

It was Hunter, his coach and godfather, who saw through Ward when he said he didn't care about boxing anymore. He convinced him not to let the Olympics pass him by. And Ward felt the influence of God drawing him and pulling on him—leading him to be the champion he was supposed to be. The champion he became.

### **Stopping to Smell the Roses**

Looking back on his career now, Ward is finally able to bask in his professional accomplishments. That's something he never did until he retired. "I didn't allow myself to glance at the belts and say, 'Wow, you're pretty good,'" he says. Now, "I've had the opportunity to embrace what I did over the past 23 years."

Retirement has been harder than Ward ever thought it would be. There are days when he questions the decision at all. "What did you do?" he asks himself sometimes. "You had opportunity, you had money, you could still be doing your thing!" He misses those fat paychecks. Who wouldn't? But there are other things too. The smell of the gym. The feeling of getting his hand raised in front of tens of thousands of people. The roar of the crowd filling his ears.

Since walking away from the ring, nothing has given him the sensation he used to get walking into it.

But Ward isn't trying to re-create that. He's chasing other highs now: the euphoric feeling he has when his crew does a great show live on the air, the time he gets to spend just being a dad to his own five kids. He used to go away for weeks at a time. Now, he laughs, they whine when he's out of the house for a few days.

Ward will always be known as one of the world's best boxers. But he's working to make sure his legacy is more than that. "You don't have to be a fighter, you don't have to be an athlete," he says. "Even though what we do is a lot of who we are, we have to work to not allow what we're doing as our vocation to truly define us."

These days, the ultra-competitive former boxer tries to maximize his potential in whatever he does, as a broadcaster, a businessman, a father, investor, or mentor—always holding himself accountable and asking how he can improve.



In other words, “Whatever my hands find to do,” he says, “I’m doing with all my might.”

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