

## VIC DARCHINYAN

Armenia, population three million, is one of the nuts in Europe's nutcracker: wars, annexation with Russia, harassment from Azerbaijan, genocide and other unpleasantness from Turkey. Borders under threat, national service compulsory. To succeed here you have to think of a bigger picture. You have to leave your family and friends and go somewhere else.

At the age of eight, so he tells it, Darchinyan was already in the gym, getting a pasting at first from bigger boys but discovering the freakish strength inherited from his father, a professional wrestler for 15 years.

"When he was young he was known to have very good power," says Vic. He talks about power a lot. "My power", like it's something he owns and uses only at the correct time – a gun or a magic wand.

Even as a child he refused to fight on the streets. "To be honest with you, I don't like to show off. One punch from me is going to be very dangerous, no matter how big my opponent – one punch in the jaw is enough to break it."

His amateur career took him to Russia, the Ukraine, China – places where he had to prove himself every time. He loved the challenge.

"When I was living in Kiev, in the Ukraine, I was sparring guys twice the size of me. I say, 'You think I'm small, you're going to knock me out with one punch, let's see.' And I have damaged guys badly..."

As he says this, the muscle memory kicks in, his fist rising from the table. On his wedding finger is a ring the size of a Quality Street. Around his neck is a chunky chain ending in a big boxing glove inscribed with "Vic". If you're looking for self-doubt, look somewhere else.

Famed trainer Johnny Lewis says the boxer is quite a package: "He's got an inner strength and his mental toughness is second to none. The power that he possesses for a little bloke is astronomical and above all his desire and discipline have made all those things forge into one."

**"One punch from me is going to be very dangerous, no matter how big my opponent."**



**Like Mike:** Darchinyan cites Mike Tyson as his boxing inspiration.

### SCENES FROM THE LIFE OF VIC DARCHINYAN, PART TWO

*A boxing ring in Connecticut, July 2007.*

*Darchinyan puts his IBO and IBF flyweight world title belts up against Filipino Nonito Donaire. He is undefeated, but distracted. Trainer Billy Hussein shouts instructions to him that Darchinyan barely listens to. Halfway across the world his Russian fiancée Olga is about to give birth to his first son.*

*He paws at Donaire's face and lunges, landing few punches, cocking the big left-hand so he can knock this chump out and go back home on the next plane. Midway through round five he lunges forward again, straight onto Donaire's sucker left hook. It's a peach. Darchinyan hits the deck and clatters up, tottering on Bambi legs across the ring into the ropes. The fight's over but he doesn't believe it. In the instant before he's surrounded by the referee, medical staff and corner men, the camera catches Darchinyan's face. It's the desperate look of a man whose carefully harvested store of ego, belief and tactical know-how is falling about his feet like dropped coins.*

When Darchinyan makes the 27-hour trip back to Armenia as probably the finest sportsman that country has ever produced, he is mobbed.

"The women are crying, kissing my hands, hugging me. I cannot believe," he says.

"The men are tough – they are not showing their emotions."

Darchinyan is also tough, not showing his emotions. Straight after the Donaire fight he stands stoically in front of the microphone and says he wasn't hurt.

"I still think I can't be beaten," he says now.

"I punched myself that night, you know? In my mind was always my wife and my baby. I wanted to knock him out fast and go."



When it gets down among the lower weights, boxing, if possible, gets even harder. You have to go to places like the Philippines and Mexico, lairs of the tough little men, where the screaming crowds spit and throw things, the referees let the most vicious fouls slide by and to get a decision you have to knock their champion flat out cold on the ground. You show no weakness. For years following his pro debut after the Sydney Olympics and a proud amateur career, under the guidance of Jeff Fenech and then Billy Hussein, Darchinyan, Raging Bull, the "Mexican Assassin" had been the best at this game. Until Donaire.

Johnny Lewis thinks that loss cost Darchinyan more than he will ever show.

"He got to thinking that a big punch is the only option and it's a silly thing to think, because he's got far more than power.

"He lost that fight by talking the way he's talking to you. I don't think that he has to be macho because when someone does what Vic's done, then suddenly gets knocked out – and it was a bad knock-out – most occasions that is virtually the end of their career, or certainly the writing's on the wall. But Vic, through a lot of wisdom and soul-searching, has come back a better fighter now than what he was before."

Sometimes, if bored, Darchinyan goes to the gym and pulls out 1500 to 2000 push-ups. He'll put on a movie and perform crunches throughout (to prove it, he stands up and shows me a stomach like the back wall of a cave). His fitness and dedication are legendary, even among other fighters. His power will always be there but the confidence comes from his preparation.

"When I step in the ring I have to feel in 100 per cent good condition. One week after the Donaire fight I was already in the gym. I know I have to train and prove to the world that it was just a mistake."

Now, Darchinyan's preparation included a revamped management team and an additional member: Armenian Vazgen Badalyan, seasoned trainer of amateurs including the man himself, and a reminder that the big left hook is not the only option available.

Darchinyan's mid-2008 bout against IBF junior bantamweight champion Dimitri Kirilov was the clearest sign yet of his rebirth as a more complete boxer. Stalked throughout, harassed by vicious combinations and knocked down twice, the previously unbeaten Russian was finally put out of his misery in round five. Now Darchinyan felt ready to do something no one in his weight class had ever done before.

PHOTOGRAPHY: STEVE MARCUS/PICTURE MEDIA (LEFT); BRETT COSTELLO (ABOVE); DANNY MOLOSHOK/AAP (RIGHT)