

From Burnout to Knockouts: A Boxer's Second Wind

Daniel Morales wasn't destined for the baseball diamond. As a child he played little league, but when the time came to transition away from the pitching machine and face live pitching, everything changed. "I was scared of getting hit by the ball," Morales remembered, laughing at the irony of what came next. "So, we called it quits on baseball." He might have thought his days in sports were over, but fate saw that this was only just the beginning. One day, driving around their neighborhood in Eastern San Diego County, Morales' father, Daniel, noticed a boxing gym having its grand opening. "He brought up the idea and asked if I wanted to get into boxing. Now here I am, from being scared of getting hit by a baseball and now I'm getting punched in the face," Morales said, with a laugh. What started as a spur-of-the-moment decision would eventually change Daniel's life, taking him from a nervous Little Leaguer to an undefeated professional boxer.

At just eight years old, Daniel stepped into the boxing gym for the first time. The transition wasn't smooth. "I don't remember if I was scared at first, but I cried a lot during my early sparring sessions," Morales said. "I had this bad bloody nose problem, which made everything worse." It was a rough start, but he pushed through. Morales started going to the gym every day and with a large stable of fighters his own age, The House of Boxing gym in Central San Diego became his second home. His mother, Kenya Morales, recalls those early years. "When Daniel decided to take on boxing as a sport, I

didn't think much of it. I would take him to practice and enjoyed watching him. Never thinking that one day he would lace up his gloves, get in the ring, and actually compete," Kenya said. Morales was progressing fast and jumped straight into competition, quickly making a name for himself in the Southern California amateur circuit.

By the time Morales was in his early teens, he had already fought in nearly 40 amateur bouts. He was a local rising star, known for his fast hands and southpaw stance. "It felt great fighting as a young amateur," Daniel said. "I was doing something I loved, and I wasn't doing it alone. I trained with other kids, and we pushed each other. It felt like a team." Daniel thrived on the camaraderie in the gym, a sentiment echoed by his amateur record.

As Morales continued to succeed in the amateurs, the endless grind in one of the world's toughest sports began to take its toll. As Daniel's reputation grew, so did the demands of the sport. He found himself facing tougher opponents and training twice as hard to compensate, often pushing himself to the limit, and it started to wear him down. "I was training all the time, fighting all the time," Morales said. "It felt like boxing was all I had." His mother, Kenya Morales, explained what she thought was happening to him. "Daniel was going through some changes in the family dynamic as a teenager," she said. "I think having such a strong father pushing him all the time, with no breaks, it really pushed him to his limit, and he had to take a step back from it all and focus on himself and his well-being and simply be a teenager."

The excitement of winning in such a tough sport was slowly being replaced by exhaustion, both physical and mental. Morales was starting to envy the simpler lives of his friends. While they were hanging out after school playing video games, and doing other things typical kids would do, Daniel was in the gym, honing his skills. "I saw my friends having fun, just living normal lives, and I was still a kid, I felt like I was missing out," Morales said.

His burnout didn't come overnight. It began with subtle signs dreading early morning runs, mentally checking out during sparring sessions. By the time he turned 15, he felt he needed to make a change. "I was just burnt out, you know?" Daniel reflected. "It was the training, the fights, the pressure, it was a lot. And then I hit high school, and I just needed a break." What was supposed to be a brief, one-month break stretched into two years away from the sport. For someone who had lived and breathed boxing since the age of eight, those two years felt like an eternity. Although the news came as a surprise to many of those close to him, he received nothing but support for his decision to stop. "I was a bit sad but mostly shocked, only because I know how passionate he was and still is about boxing," Morales' mother said. "Throughout his boxing career, I have always been very supportive about his choices and decisions he makes regarding the sport. If it was something he no longer wanted to do, I supported him. And the moment he was no longer enjoying it, I supported his decision."

During his time away from the ring, Daniel tried to live the 'regular kid life' he had once envied. He focused on school and turned to his friends for support, spending more

time with them and for the first time in years, he let himself relax. "I just kind of lived like a normal kid," he said. "I'd go to school, come home, play video games. Some days, I'd go to my friends' houses, play basketball, football, or just hang out." For a while, boxing was no longer his number one priority. But even though he was no longer in the gym, boxing never left him. "I'd shadow box around the house sometimes," Morales said. "Just little things. Boxing was always there, like a routine I couldn't forget."

Even though he wasn't ready to admit it at the time, Daniel knew his days in boxing were far from over. His love for the sport never truly disappeared; he just needed time to refresh his body, and most importantly, his mind. What finally pulled him back wasn't a coach's pep talk or an overwhelming desire to return. It was his friend, Nico 'So Fly' Sanchez, a multiple time Junior Olympics National Champion and fellow boxer, who helped reignite Daniel's passion. "Nico's dad, Carlos, told me one day, 'Come to the gym with Nico,'" Morales remembered. "I wasn't really planning to go back, but I figured why not? He picked me up, and we went to Victory to train with Coach James. That's when it all started again."

Victory Gym in San Diego, owned by former Navy SEAL turned podcaster Jocko Willink, became the site of Daniel's resurgence. James Thomas, Victory's head boxing coach was the perfect fit for Morales, as he understood the delicate balance between pushing an athlete and keeping them content in the sport. "I try to keep things fresh and fun," coach Thomas said. "I'm always talking to Daniel, asking him how he feels, what things he likes, what needs work. The key to success is keeping things fun."

Training under Thomas, Morales recommitted himself to boxing. A new gym environment may have been all he needed, and now he approaches the sport with a different mindset. "The break was great for me." Daniel said. "It changed everything. Before, I had that little kid mentality, just going through the motions. But during the break, I grew up. When I came back, I had a new mindset, and I wanted it even more." His mother was quick to agree. "Well, just look at him!" Kenya said. "Sometimes you have to take a step back to move forward, and that's exactly what he did! He came back focused, determined, unstoppable! His perseverance and love for the sport made him the professional he is today."

Returning to boxing wasn't just about getting back into shape it was about building on what he had already accomplished. This time, Daniel wasn't coming back to the amateur circuit. After talking it over with his parents and coach Thomas, he decided to go pro. "I don't really remember why we skipped the amateurs and went straight to the pros," Morales said. "But my team thought it was the right move, so we went for it."

At just 17, while still in high school, Daniel made his professional debut. Now, with an undefeated 8-0 record and five knockouts, Daniel has proven that his time away from the ring didn't diminish his talent-it refined it. Coach Thomas, who has been with Daniel since his return, credits Daniel's success to his maturity and discipline. "Daniel listens, and he's smart in the ring," Thomas said. "We've sparred with some of the best

fighters out there, and he's held his own. He's a quick learner and always willing to improve."

Coach Thomas had seen Daniel's potential even after the two-year hiatus. "When he came back, his balance was off, and his uppercuts weren't landing with the power they needed," Thomas explained. "We worked on his stance, his balance, and power shots. It took time, but now he's got it."

The key to Daniel's resurgence has been balance, something both he and his coach are mindful of. "It's important that Daniel stays happy," Coach Thomas said. "Boxing should be fun for him, and if I push him too hard, the same thing can happen again. I'm here to make sure he stays grounded and doesn't lose that hunger. I've got to keep him in check; if I don't, his opponent will."

Outside of the ring, Daniel has learned to enjoy the quieter moments. "I like to nap," Morales said, laughing. "Work keeps me busy training people, teaching classes. On weekends, I like to chill with my friends, go fishing, eat, and spend time with my family. It's important to have that balance." Still just 20 years old, Daniel has big ambitions. Like many fighters, he believes he can become world champion, but for him, it goes deeper than that. "I want people to remember me in the pros," Morales said. "I want them to say, 'That kid was good'. I want to leave a statement in the world of boxing."

Having been a top sparring partner in training camps for various world champions, including Oscar Valdez and Rafael Espinoza, Morales already knows his potential can bring him to the top. For Coach Thomas, the sky is the limit. "Daniel's got the skills, the mindset, and the drive to go far," Thomas said. "As long as he stays humble and keeps taking advantage of the opportunities in front of him, there's no telling how far he can go."

Daniel's story isn't just about winning fights, it's about resilience. He faced a burn out, stepped away from the sport, and found his way back stronger than ever. Now, with a renewed focus and an undefeated record, Daniel Morales is not just fighting to get to the title. He's fighting to make sure he never loses his love for the sport again. With every step forward, he's proving that sometimes, taking time off can allow you to come back even stronger.