Otis Grant takes swing at second chance

By Herb Zurkowsky, Montreal Gazette

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It has been almost seven years since the night Otis Grant was nearly robbed of his life, and certainly lost the prime years of his professional boxing career. Time has helped erode, if not erase, the memory.

"I try not to think about that," he said. "What's in the past should remain in the past."

What might have been had he not been driving south on Highway 15, near St. Jerome, Que., on that warm, late spring night in June 1999, meeting another car travelling in the wrong direction? Grant swerved, taking the brunt of the impact on his side to spare his two passengers: daughter Alexandria and fellow boxer Herc Kyvelos.

His passengers escaped unscathed, but Grant fractured five ribs, punctured a lung and shattered his shoulder blade.

He remained in a coma for seven days. According to doctors, his excellent condition won Grant his life, but after awakening, he was told he'd never again fight.

Grant had lost his World Boxing Organization middleweight title six months earlier to Roy Jones, but his prospects seemed bright. Grant's contract with promoter Art Pelullo was nearing an end. He had become a sparring partner for Jones and there was talk of him joining Jones' stable, which certainly would have boosted Grant's career.

"Things could have happened ... the possibilities were tremendous," Grant said. "But I also know there's a lot of BS in this business. You can't be bitter. If you're bitter about things in life in general, it'll eat you up. I don't sit down and say: `Why me? Why this?' Stuff happens and hurdles are thrown your way.

"I've driven by that spot many times, showing my wife and kids where the thing happened. They know the general area, although I can't pinpoint the spot specifically. I drive all the time."

More than four years after the crash, Grant launched his comeback, defeating former world champion Dingaan Thobela in November 2003, knocking him down in the process. And Grant has kept on winning six more times to boost his record to 39-2-1 with 17 knockouts. He's ranked first by the World Boxing Council, second by the WBO and 12th by the World Boxing Association.

Saturday at the Montreal Casino, seven years after getting a second shot at life, Grant will get another crack at a title when he meets undefeated Mexican Librado Andrade (22-0-0, 16 KOs) in a 12-round WBC super-middleweight title eliminator. The winner automatically becomes the mandatory challenger for WBC 168-pound champ Markus Beyer, with that bout potentially occurring in September.

Grant, a technical and methodical fighter who has been well-groomed but lacks the excitement of a knockout specialist, might be well past his prime. But he also has four years' less wear and tear on his body.

"This is it, my last kick at the can," he said. "Did I think, after what I'd been through, I'd be one fight from a world title? Honestly, the answer's no. Fighting for a world title (again) wasn't part of my thoughts or dreams."

This happened quite by chance. Grant returned to the gym initially to help his older brother, Howard, a former Canadian lightweight champ, prepare Joachim Alcine for an upcoming bout, Alcine one of 10 fighters Howard Grant trained. Today, the brothers operate a Montreal gym under their name that boasts a membership of almost 100. Howard Grant has trained his baby brother throughout the comeback, their bond strengthening.

"We were close. This has brought us closer. We have a tighter bond and I love working with Otis," Howard said. "It's unbelievable, the trust we have in each other, although I'll tell you honestly, Otis gets no special treatment. If not for the car accident, maybe I wouldn't be coaching him."

Grant always had a good work ethic, living a clean life outside the ring and not abusing his body. That made the comeback more achievable.

"It's been fun and I've been motivated," Howard said. "I'd like him to get the world title. It has been a nice ride and I'll remain on this roller-coaster until it stops. I want him in the gym to help me train (the members), but I don't want him to lose. I'm willing to put in the 12-hour days until he loses."

Win or lose Saturday, Grant's future appears bright. He'll continue assisting his brother in the gym and has been promised a position with promoter Yvon Michel's firm.

"He told me already that his comeback has been a success," Michel said. "One win and he fights for a world championship. One loss and he becomes an executive, I guess.

"He was supposed to be dead. He kept winning and wanted to know the level he could achieve. We brought him back and gave him popularity."

Grant long ago became a hero in the eyes of many. He formerly worked as an aide at Montreal's Lindsay Place high school, assisting in the integration of troubled teenagers. And, while his bones were mending, he established the Otis Grant and Friends Foundation, a non-profit organization that collects funds and assists the needy through a variety of activities and sporting events.

"I'm glad I got this second chance and it has turned out this way," he said. "With or without boxing, I'm not worried. It's not so much that I have a new appreciation of life. What I appreciate is spending time with my family. Before, I was always worried about saving for tomorrow. Now I realize tomorrow may never come."