

Ayala Might Beat Morales

Written by Rick Folstad

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I've always got a lot on my mind- of course some would say I don't have anything between the ears, but that's a matter of opinion- and I was just thinking about a few things. Just off the top of my head:

* Paulie Ayala will beat Erik Morales this Saturday night in a thriller. Yup, I'm tabbing Ayala, a three-to-one dog over 'El Terrible'. Why? Well, that's a good question. First, Ayala, is better than people think. I know, I know, he's been on the fortunate end of some Bob Arum-influenced decisions but this is a guy who for the last two or three years has always given respectable performances against world class opposition. Secondly, while Morales is the bigger fighter, tell me the last time that he really starched someone as a featherweight. If you recall, most of his notable knockouts have come as a 122-pounder. Third, guys like the limited In Jin Chi, the ordinary Gutty Espadas, the light hitting Wayne McCullough and the ancient Daniel Zaragoza have all been competitive with Morales. And it says right here, that the 2002 version of Ayala is better than any of those above mentioned names. And finally from a stylistic standpoint, Ayala has what it takes to disrupt Morales. Because for all his height and reach advantages that he has, Morales oftentimes does a poor job of establishing distance and lets himself be smothered on the inside. Ayala, is a technically sound fighter, who has a strong set of legs that can close the gap and is a very busy, active fighter who offsets his lack of true punching power with a volume of shots. These are the types of guys that have given Morales trouble in the past. Ayala, may not be the most naturally gifted fighter out there and he seems somewhat limited, but at the end of the day all he does is win. He is the classic overachiever that gets every last ounce out of his talent. And it's those guys, much like a Rocky Marciano, that you find out are the toughest guys to face.

* Sharmba Mitchell and Zab Judah need to fight immediately. Yes, everyone wants a crack at the undisputed jr. welterweight champion Kostya Tszyu and both Mitchell and Judah would love rematches with the pony-tailed Russian who now makes Australia his home. But based on the hatred and animosity that these two east coast southpaws have for each other, this is the fight I want to see. And these emotions exist with these guys having never faced each other in actual competition. This actually goes back to when the process of unifying this division was taking place. Back in early 2001, Judah was holding the IBF title and Mitchell the WBA version of the crown. During that time both fighters would take turns taking verbal pot shots at each other. At that time it was

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nothing more than some good, clean, fun posturing from both fighters. But things got taken to another level when Mitchell would have to quit on his stool against Tszyu with a knee injury.

Mitchell, who was despondent over losing his title would begin to get emotional and Judah, who was doing some ringside commentary for Showtime stated, " C'mon, there's no crying in the ghetto!!!" What's ironic is that when Judah was stopped by Tszyu later in the year, it was Judah who threw a child-like temper tantrum in the ring. Last week on a national conference call to promote his fight against Vince Phillips, Mitchell mocked Judah's reaction. Then after his win over Phillips this past weekend, he had a few choice words for the Brooklyn native. Judah, on various websites would comeback with his response- which included promising to send Mitchell to the grave. In other words what we have here is a great prelude to a promotion that has to be made. And think about it, neither guy is going to get Tszyu in the near future anyway, so why not face each other? In wrestling for years they have had 'loser leaves town' matches where the vanquished grapplers can never set foot in certain regions(or at least until they come up with a new storyline), here we can have the 'loser leaves ghetto' stipulation. The loser of this bout would never be able to set foot in the inner city and must have his personal belongings packed and ready to go to the nearest suburbs where they must live the life of the Huxtables. Hmm, now that I think about it, who would be the loser in that case?

* Who's the game's best pound-for-pound? Think about it, Bernard Hopkins has been on ice, Roy Jones has gone through one mis-mandatory after another, Oscar De La Hoya can make a claim but he hasn't been that active, Tszyu could also make one because of the quality of his recent wins, Vernon Forrest has two big wins over Shane Mosley, but what else? And Mosley is currently on a two fight losing skid. So who makes the strongest claim? How 'bout Marco Antonio Barrera? Think about it, in the last few years he's has wins over Morales, Naseem Hamed, Enrique Sanchez and most recently a systematic win over Johnny Tapia. He's fought regularly against world-class competition and his continued to hone his style as he matures. No, he's not as exciting as he once was but in making some adjustments to his new, more calculating approach he most likely is extending his career.

* Juan Manuel Marquez is the best fighter in the world never to hold a major title. Have you ever seen this guy? Call me crazy, but I think if he fights Barrera, he is no worse than a 7-5 underdog and that's it. Yeah, he's that good and that dangerous and that's exactly why he's had problems getting some of the other blue-chip 126-pounders in there with him. It seems that his promoter Bob Arum signed him up for the sole

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reason of keeping him away from the likes of Morales and some of his other Top Rank stable. But this can guy really box- I think he's the games best counter-puncher in the biz, who possesses great hand-speed, reflexes and timing. All he needs is the opportunity. He dropped the ball a bit when he fought Freddy Norwood in 1999 for the WBA crown but I have a feeling that he won't let that happen again when he takes on the crafty vet Manny Medina in March for the vacant IBF title.

* What can we expect out of Ward-Gatti II? Now, as far as I'm concerned if these two blue collar brawlers can give us half the fight they gave us the first time, I won't complain. But is there any chance they duplicate what they did in April? Probably not, but you've got to figure that neither guy is really a 'cutie' and that their basic styles never really change from one fight to another. Also, neither guy could get into a bad or boring fight if they tried. I think both guys will go in with gameplans designed to box a bit more and to control the flow of the fight but once they each get hit I think the leather will begin to fly freely. Remember, in life, you are what you are. And both of these warriors are fighters who fight. They don't know any better and we should be thankful for that.

* Has Roy Jones signed the contract to fight John Ruiz yet? Seriously, I keep hearing about how they're still waiting to sign the 'long form contract' for this bout. Guys, this is a boxing contract that is pretty standard for a fight like this, not War and Peace, it can't be THAT long for pete's sake. I mean they're treating this as if they're chiseling out the Ten Commandments on stone tablets or something. Just sign the contract already. That's of course if Roy really wants this fight. And with the IBF denying his request for an exception, he can always back out of the Ruiz fight by saying that he simply cannot let himself be stripped of his hard-earned belts and fight his mandatory challenger Antonio Tarver.

* Holyfield will lose to Byrd. I'm saying it right now, Chris Byrd will box circles around Evander Holyfield and Byrd will make it look easy. I know, I know, like everyone else I've made the mistake of counting out the 'Real Deal' before but I think Byrd has the type of style that will give Holyfield fits. Holyfield is most effective with guy who will stand in front of him and give him counter-punching openings. Byrd, is the antithesis of that, he will circle and jab his way around Holyfield all night and Holyfield at this stage of his career isn't in any mood to chase poeple down. I like Byrd to slap his way to a 12 round decision. But I'll make another prediction, based on the way this fight goes, Evander will say that he will keep going because he really didn't get beat but that he had a guy that was running from him all night.