Written by Rick Folstad
Sunday, 06 July 2003 21:00

He’s a smaller version of the Marlboro Man, a brash interloper with a marble chin who claims to smoke two packs of cigarettes a day when he’s not on the clock.

WBA and WBC welterweight champion Ricardo Mayorga (25-3-1, 23 KO’s) is either the second-coming of Roberto Duran or the reincarnation of the Flim Flam Man. He‘s either a deserving world champion or a big talker who got lucky one night and caught former champion Vernon Forrest looking the other way.

And that‘s what makes this fight something worth watching on HBO. We want to find out who this Mayorga guy really is, if he’s the future of the welterweight division or a one-trick pony whose comedy act has already grown stale.

All legitimate questions and serious second-guessing regarding the stranger from Nicaragua are expected to be answered Saturday night when he takes on Forrest at The Orleans in Las Vegas in their second meeting this year.

In their first fight in January, most of the heavy partiers in the Vernon Forrest Fan Club choked on their pretzels and beer when the guy many fight critics thought was one of the best pound-for-pound fighters in the world, went down on the canvas with a loud thump in both the first and third rounds. The fight was over before most of us knew how to pronounce Mayorga. Viewers across the country grabbed the encyclopedia to find out where the hell Nicaragua was.

Now they’re going to fight again and Mayorga - bless his soul - has told us we don’t have to find the most comfortable chair in the house to enjoy the fight. We won’t be sitting in front of the TV that long.

"I will knock out Forrest in two rounds whether I have a cigarette or not," Mayorga said on a conference call last week.

Well, thanks for the tip, Ricardo. You got any inside stuff on the Holyfield - Toney fight?

Mayorga is a caring soul who says he knows a lot of people want to see him fight more than a couple rounds. That‘s why he came up with the great idea of having two of his sparring partners on standby so when he was done with Forrest, he could entertain us by going a few rounds with the sparring partners.

"That way you can see me fight 12 rounds," said Mayorga, who lives in Costa Rica and is nicknamed El Matador.

Mayorga continued to add humor to the call when he said he was willing to bet $100,000 with any boxing writer that he would beat Forrest the second time. It was a safe bet considering who he was talking to on the phone. It would have been a legitimate challenge - a case of actually putting his money where his mouth was - if he said ten bucks.

But you've got to hand it to Mayorga. How many fighters eat pizza while they're standing on the scales for the weigh-in? How many world champions have nicotine stains on their teeth and tar in their lungs?

Suddenly, there's a little color in the fight game. We haven't had this much fun since they booked the Peter McNeeley -Mike Tyson fight.

But while Mayorga makes bold promises and pokes fun, you wonder how thing are going in the Vernon Forrest camp. The 2002 Fighter of the Year opened 2003 with the first and only loss of his career, and it was a devastating one.

He was like a great king suddenly being dethroned by the court jester. And now he wants his crown back.

Somebody want to lend me a hundred grand?