

Repeat or Revenge?

Written by Steve Kim
Monday, 07 July 2003 21:00

This Saturday night in Las Vegas, Ricardo Mayorga and Vernon Forrest go at it again for the WBC and WBA welterweight titles that are both currently held by Mayorga. The first time they met in late January, Mayorga, a heavy underdog, would shock Forrest and the rest of the Western Hemisphere by chopping down Forrest in three fast-paced rounds.

Conventional wisdom says that the second time around, Forrest won't get into an ill-advised slugfest and box safely to a decision win. And why not? Forrest, on paper, has the advantages in almost every tangible aspect of this fight except for punching power. And he also has the superior pedigree, having been schooled in the U.S. amateur system where he was good enough to represent his country in the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona, Spain. Most people think that Mayorga punched his way to a lottery ticket and if Forrest can take 'El Matador' to the deep water, he'll drown him.

Not me.

Yup, you got it, I'm going with Mayorga in the rematch. You say I'm nuts - hey, I've been called much worse so that doesn't bother me. But have you ever heard of Iran Barkley and Junior Jones? You do remember them, right?

Barkley aka 'the Blade' was a hard punching roughneck from the streets of New York. He was a guy that was good enough to win titles and hold his own at the world class level against anybody. But he was far from invincible losing to guys like James Toney in 10-brutal rounds, Nigel Benn (getting knocked out in one round), then getting out-boxed by Michael Nunn, losing a barn-burner to an aged Roberto Duran, he was also out-pointed by Sumbu Kalambay and early on his in his career he would lose to Eddie Hall, Robbie Sims and Osley Silas.

But in between all this he would beat future Hall-of-Famer Thomas Hearns twice. Yes, twice. Do it once and it's an aberration, do it twice and it's a trend.

And their first fight looked a little bit like the first match-up between Mayorga and Forrest, where a single punch ended the bout for both Barkley and Hearns. What's interesting is that Hearns had completely dominated the first two-and-half rounds of their first fight, cutting up and bruising Barkley all over. Back in January, the action was pretty even, until Forrest got clipped with a big right hand that sent him crashing to the canvas.

The second time around, Hearns and Barkley would meet nearly four years later and two weight divisions up. They had met in June of 1988 for the WBC middleweight title and the rematch was held in March of 1992 for the WBA

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light heavyweight belt. In the rematch, Barkley would prove that the first fight was no fluke as he would win a close unanimous decision against 'The Hit Man', becoming the first and only man to down Hearns twice. He had not only beaten Hearns in a sprint, he also defeated him in a marathon.

Take the case of Junior Jones, 'Poison' was his nickname, due to his big right hand and boxing skills. His build was reminiscent of a bantamweight Hearns, he had a torso as long as Texas and anvils in each shoulder. The often over-zealous New York media had hailed him as a future Hall-of-Famer before he had even made his pro debut. By 1993, he had captured the WBA bantamweight belt by besting the highly regarded Jorge Julio. It looked to be the start of a long and prosperous title run.

Instead it didn't even last a year. Jones would be upset by John Michael Johnson and two fights later, before he could even get a return match, he got knocked out by journeyman Darryl Pinckney. His route to Canastota had been derailed.

Slowly, he was able to pick up the pieces and reel off a string of victories that put him in line for a shot at Marco Antonio Barrera in November of 1996.

By that point, Barrera had firmly entrenched himself as the heir apparent to Julio Cesar Chavez as the next great Mexican superstar. His fight with Kennedy McKinney in February of that year was not only his, but HBO's 'Boxing After Dark' launching pad. Jones was thought of as a highly visible opponent but an 'opponent' nonetheless. He was there to provide a big name, but to ultimately lose.

They would fight at the Tampa Ice Palace in Tampa, Florida and for the first four rounds, Jones would consistently beat Barrera to the punch with quick 1-2's, the jab-right cross combination would neutralize Barrera early. They would engage in several heated exchanges but on this night, Jones' usually suspect legs and chin held up firm. In the fifth round, Jones would be getting the better of it again before nailing Barrera with a picture perfect right hand on the button. Barrera would eventually get up before succumbing to a swarm of Jones' punches at the end of the round. Barrera, would officially be disqualified for having his cornermen jump into the ring before the bell had sounded; but it was clear, Jones had knocked out Barrera.

Like Mayorga and Forrest, they would agree to an immediate rematch. And five months later, Jones and Barrera would meet again. It was thought that Barrera was looking past Jones the first time, focusing instead on a lucrative bout with Naseem Hamed; and that if the fight should go to the later rounds in the rematch, Jones would ultimately yield to his pressure and body attack.

Guess what? It didn't happen. In fact, the opposite occurred. It was Barrera who was strong early, making some key adjustments with his own jab and tucking in his chin this time around; but Jones would be every bit as strong down the stretch and he would take the play away from

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Barrera to take a well-earned unanimous decision.

However, they would have divergent career paths afterwards. Jones would never win another meaningful fight again for the rest of his career and Barrera has seemingly gotten better and better in cementing his status as a Hall-of-Famer.

Looking at Mayorga's career record there's no way that he should be in the same ring with Forrest. Mayorga lost his pro debut to a Humberto Aranda (getting stopped in six) and he would lose both his ninth and tenth pro heats to an 8-8 Roger Flores and a 0-1 Henry Castillo. If Forrest was a prized thoroughbred nurtured throughout his career, Mayorga was nearly taken to the glue factory.

But since that point he's 18-0-1 and his last two wins have come in title fights against Andrew Lewis and Forrest. Maybe Mayorga, for all his awkwardness, wildness and zeal, is an improving fighter, who's swaggering confidence - which borders on arrogance - grows each and every time out.

Quick, name me a fight that doesn't involve Shane Mosley, where Forrest has really impressed you? You really can't do it, can you? Forrest, is what he is, a well-schooled, technician. He is blessed with great size, can box, and isn't afraid to stink out the joint to win a fight.

Maybe what Vernon Forrest was to Shane Mosley, Ricardo Mayorga is to him.

Forrest is a guy who likes to box at his own pace, which is usually not that fast, and to work exclusively off the jab. He prefers to work at a distance and he likes to set his feet and establish his reach - you won't see a lot of stickin'-and-moving from him. What Mayorga was able to accomplish in that first fight was to make Forrest fight at a tempo and speed that was uncomfortable for him. It was akin to a basketball team who likes to play half-court basketball facing a full-court press.

You knew Forrest was in danger when a ringside observer said after his first bout with Mayorga that, 'I knew he was in trouble when I saw that he was actually in a good fight'. Yeah, Vernon's not real accustomed to that.

And when you saw Forrest, the classic stand-up boxer, throwing lead right hands and left hooks, he was fighting at a pace and style that didn't suit him. The biggest mis-perception of the first fight is that Mayorga simply landed a lucky punch. The bottom line is that Mayorga, with his frantic style, was able to catch Forrest in more exchanges - and therefore clean punches - than any other of his opponents combined. The eventual knockout punch just happened to be the final one he would land.

Where Mosley was unable or unwilling to go through the Forrest fire, Mayorga seemed

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emboldened by those same punches and had the vigor to keep coming forward and pressing the attack - like Barkley did to Hearn.

And it says here that in the rematch, he'll have more staying power than what most people believe - like Jones against Barrera.