

He's Back

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

Fernando Vargas returns this Saturday to the ring against Fitz Vanderpool after a 10 month sabbatical/suspension from the ring in the aftermath of his knockout loss to arch-rival Oscar De La Hoya last September.

It was bad enough getting beat by a fighter he loathed to a point that he basically obsessed over since turning pro. It was entirely another, to add insult to injury by being busted for steroids. With that revelation, Vargas comes into his bout this weekend at the Olympic Auditorium, with a new crew surrounding him.

Gone are physical conditioners/nutritionists John Philbin and Mazzan Ali, who had clashed beforehand over a difference in philosophies. But it has to be noted that it was Ali who weeks after the loss to De La Hoya was busted for steroid possession. And it shouldn't stun you that he comes from a background in body-building. And let's put it this way, you'll have a much easier time finding 'roids in body-building than George 'Dubya' Bush has had finding weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

Regardless of who's to blame, the instructors at ProCamp have taken over the duties of making sure Vargas is in tip-top fighting condition. Vargas had been doing their regimen since early January at the Golds Gym in Santa Monica. Yes, I know, a guy who just got busted for steroids working out at Golds Gym, it just overflows with irony. It's like a guy being a sponsor at Alcoholics Anonymous working at a liquor store. There is less heavy lifting of dead weights and instead a focus on rebuilding the inside of the body by strengthening the foundation.

But perhaps the most important addition to Team Vargas has been Buddy McGirt, who has a roster full of world class fighters under his wing. McGirt, a former two-time world champion isn't being brought in here to overhaul Vargas' style- quite frankly, he is what he is at this point in his career. But he is there to remind Vargas of what he once was. A very good boxer-puncher that used angles, avoided punches and threw quick combinations. If you know anything about his amateur days, anyone that saw him- including himself, will tell you he was more boxer than slugger. Somewhere along the way in the midst of his Aztec Warrior persona that he cultivated, he lost his way and became something that he wasn't.

And consequently his defense- or lack thereof- would catch up to him in his two losses against De La Hoya and Felix Trinidad. Which so far are the definitive fights in his career. McGirt is there to remind him that boxing at the highest levels is sometimes won above the neck and not just with pure machismo and toughness. If he can do it with Arturo Gatti, it's not out of the realm of possibility that he can do it with Vargas. Remember, it was Vargas' smart boxing against the likes of Yory Boy Campas, Raul Marquez and Ike Quartey that have highlighted his signature performances.

It's hard to believe that with all Vargas has been through in and out of the ring, he's still just 25. Some guys don't go through this much drama over two lifetimes. It seems that this guy has

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been around forever. When he won his first 154-pound belt in December of 1998 against Campas in his 15th pro bout, he had just turned 21, becoming the youngest jr. middleweight titlist ever. Three of his first four defenses the next year would come against recognizable names like Marquez, Winky Wright and then Ike Quartey. Two fights later, he'd face Trinidad.

And to put that face-off into perspective, that would be Vargas' 21 pro bout. Trinidad had nearly as many championship fights, period. He got off the canvas twice early, made a fight of it and then succumbed late to 'Tito's' overall experience and guile. He was five days from his 23 birthday and he had taken a horrific beating and some say he has never recovered from that experience.

In his next bout six months later he would crash face first to the canvas against the light hitting Wilfredo Rivera. How light hitting his Rivera? Well, if he was a baseball player he'd be Freddie Patek, but he looked like Babe Ruth when he connected on Vargas' now questionable chin. He would eventually pick himself up and stop Rivera in six, but that occurrence basically led a reluctant De La Hoya to give his nemesis a fight that he said he would never give him.

And a familiar pattern arose once again, he was game, gritty and competitive but simply not good enough and he would be stopped late.

Was it indeed 'too much, too soon'? Maybe, but also at the same time you could say that his progress has been hampered by the fact that he simply hasn't fought enough, period. Experience is the best teacher and in today's game, if you're good enough to be an HBO/Showtime fighter early on, it means that you will be trading in valuable time in the ring for some huge early paydays.

Consider these numbers, Vargas fought seven times in his first year as a professional in 1997. Then six more times in 1998, then three times in 1999 and 2000, twice in 2001 and then just once in 2002. It's no coincidence that the sharp decline in the quantity of fights he's had came at the precise moment he was his title against Campas and essentially became an 'HBO' fighter- and long stretches of inactivity caused by suspensions or legal matter haven't helped, either. But being on HBO means you'll make the sport's biggest money but on the flip side, you're guaranteed to fight no more than twice on HBO and once on pay-per-view.

Which is great for a seasoned veteran with 35-40 fights heading into their physical prime. It's entirely another thing when you're a young man like Vargas in his very early twenties who still needs more activity to hone his skills. The reality is that Vargas was good enough at that stage to win a championship but he wasn't good enough to keep it for long stretches against the games elite. He needed more experience that he never got.

He says now that after his fight against Vanderpool that he will come back in October on Telefutura- which pays peso's on the dollar compared to the license fee's of HBO, again in either December or January and then perhaps a rematch against De La Hoya next Cinco De Mayo. Regardless, he says he will be much more active in the future.

But what does that future hold? Can his chin prove durable enough for him to make another run

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to the mountain top? Or has the physical abuse simply taken it's toll on Vargas and made him an old man before his time?

However long this ride lasts, it should be fun. And as always, full of ups and downs.