

## Now What?

Written by Steve Kim  
Sunday, 27 July 2003 21:00

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Fernando Vargas took care of business this past weekend as expected against the hand-picked and over-matched Fitz Vanderpool. But while he did come out victorious, he left the arena with just as many questions as he had coming in. Maybe more so.

This was supposed to be the 'new and improved' Vargas, one that would employ the jab, use a bit more movement and footwork and work off of angles. But as they say, the more things change the more things stay the same.

Vargas came into his bout with Vanderpool armed with a whole new cadre of physical conditioners and a new co-trainer in Buddy McGirt. But in downing Vanderpool in six rounds he looked a lot like the same Vargas we've been seeing for the past few years: little or no head movement, sparse use of his jab and constant movement going in one direction, forward.

But it has to be mentioned that at one time Vargas was actually a very efficient boxer/puncher that would systematically break his opponents down with a volume of punches and actually used a bit of quickness to avoid on-coming fire. If you don't believe me, pop in a tape of his bouts against the likes of Yory Boy Campas, Raul Marquez and Ike Quartey.

Somewhere along the way, he lost his way. I think in becoming the modern day 'Aztec Warrior' as he would proudly describe himself time and time again, he forgot about the solid amateur background that had him become the youngest national champion ever and one of the youngest Olympians ever on the U.S team in 1996. His persona may have overtaken his technique and he has suffered from it.

So what happened? Well, for one Felix Trinidad happened. And after hitting the deck- and hard- five times, we've never seen the 'old' Fernando Vargas. And now, it seems Vargas could be an 'old' 25. He seemed unsure of himself- which could be expected- but the bottom line is that he will never be Willie Pep when it comes to slipping punches and on this night against Vanderpool his punches lacked a certain zip and snap to them. He's lucky that Vanderpool's legs had all the stability of a wet noodle and that he couldn't crack an egg, but then, that is why they chose him of course.

The trademark toughness and grit will always be there. But he could bring in Lee Haney, Jack Lalane, and a host of other trainers and they wouldn't be able to put a suspect chin back together in boxing. Because as they say in this sport about fragile whiskers, 'once it's broke, it's broke' And it's one thing when your getting sent to the floor by the Trinidad's and Oscar De La Hoya's of the world, but it's entirely another when light-hitting Wilfredo Rivera sends you face first to the canvas like he did in his first fight post-Trinidad. In fact, it was this occurrence that basically ensured that De La Hoya would finally give his long time nemesis a crack at him.

A fight that somewhat predictably ended in a De La Hoya knockout victory. Like the Trinidad bout, Vargas was game and competitive but ultimately he came up short. It seems that his

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deficiencies- lack of great hand speed and defense- left him on the doorstep of the upper echelon in this sport. But did it have to be this way?

Did he really have to fight Trinidad before he even had two dozen professional bouts? I still contend that fight was made too early for Vargas. Like undisputed middleweight king Bernard Hopkins commented afterwards, "You don't feed steak to a baby" in speaking about both Vargas and David Reid, who were defeated by a much more experienced Trinidad in 2000. And for both 1996 Olympians, the after effects were noticeable.

One of the ironies of Vargas is that while he may have been prematurely put into the ring against 'Tito' the other side of the equation is that he didn't have enough developmental fights to begin with. Think about it, he just turned 25 and he only has 25 fights as we speak. Only now, is Main Events and Vargas' management beginning to slow down the pace and thinking of getting more rounds in smaller fights.

On October 3rd, Vargas will be back in action against the well-worn Tony Marshall on Telefutura- the first time in over four years that Vargas will not be fighting on HBO or on pay-per-view. Marshall is exactly the kind of opponent that Vargas needs to be facing for the next four or five fights. He's a known commodity that is past his prime, can't really punch all that much but will still go some rounds. But here's the problem, Vargas' next scheduled date is in late January back on HBO.

Now, HBO has already given him a mulligan in the form of Vanderpool, chances are that unless this past show did some boffo ratings, the gimme's are over and he may have to face a real contender again.

But Main Event's faces another quandary here, let's say Vargas struggles badly against Marshall, do they really want to risk three or four more lower level fights, knowing that there guy could get beat for a fraction of the money they could get for a De La Hoya rematch? The bottom line is that if Vargas has a tough time against Marshall the pace towards a lucrative rematch will actually be accelerated not slowed.

That may seem counter-productive, but not in the game of boxing. Think about it, do you want your fighter to get your fighter beat for a couple of hundred thousand dollars or for multi-millions? Hey, you don't have to be Mensa to realize that you choose the latter. The reality is that the handlers of Vargas have to make sure that their fighter is somehow able to make it to the dance once again to face De La Hoya.

Sooner or later.

### THE SOLUTION?

Ok, I'm not here to just point out problems but to also give some helpful advice and some solutions. No, I'm not a trainer or manager, but I play one behind the computer all the time. In fact, from my position behind the keyboard, I'm undefeated and I've taken numerous fighters to the top and beyond.

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So how do you take Vargas from 'ground zero' back to the top. Here's a few suggestions:

\* No HBO fights for at least a year. Yeah, you're going to be making pennies on the dollar but the simple cold hard fact is that Vargas wont be ready for an HBO caliber opponent for awhile and he needs the work. The type of steady work that can be had on ESPN2 and Telefutura shows. Inactivity has been a great nemesis for him.

In the past he has blown up in weight after fights and this will ensure that he stays in camp more frequently and stay busy.

\* Go with one trainer. Which means for him doing the unthinkable, letting his long-time trainer Eduardo Garcia go. But seriously, there's a reason Buddy McGirt was brought in, and it wasn't because Garcia was getting Vargas over the top. It was obvious a change of philosophy was needed and for McGirts teachings to be fully absorbed, a clean break is needed.

\* No big fights in 2004. This goes along with my first point, this whole time frame should be used as a developmental period for Vargas and if you rush to make another mega-fight for Vargas, all you're really doing is grooming him to be the proverbial 'B'-side against another big-name fighter.

The point is not to just merely get to the big dance, but to come out victorious. Something he hasn't done. And yes, while I would agree with those who say that he will always be the 'opponent' for any of the big names from 154 to 160, they owe to him to give him the absolute best shot he has at winning.

There, I told you I had all the answers.