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Friday, 26 November 2004 18:00

The fiercest rivalry in boxing since the Holyfield-Bowe trilogy resumes tonight when WBC and IBF Super-featherweight champ Erik Morales 47-1 (34) meets former two-time champ Marco Antonio Barrera 58-4 (41) for the third time in four years. Combined, this will be the 40th world title bout that Morales and Barrera have fought during their careers.

Their first fight in February of 2000 was for the undisputed junior featherweight title. For 12 rounds Morales and Barrera went at each other non-stop. In what was voted Ring Magazine's fight of the year, Morales won a controversial split decision. In June of 2002 Barrera evened the score by winning a 12 round unanimous decision over Morales in the rematch. The decision favoring Barrera in the rematch was just as controversial as the one that favored Morales in the first fight.

There are two things that make the Morales-Barrera trilogy unique. First, after fighting at 122 and 126 in the first two bouts, tonight's rubber match will be at super-featherweight (130). Second, both fighters were seen as the winner in both fights.

Morales was awarded a split decision in the first fight, a bout most observers thought Barrera won due to his late rally in the last two rounds. In the rematch, Barrera won a unanimous decision and dealt Morales his only career defeat. However, most felt that Morales carried the fight during the rematch and viewed him as the winner.

What also separates Morales-Barrera III from some of the other notable trilogies over the last 35 years is the seeming dislike they have for each other. The Ali-Frazier trilogy, the standard for which all others are measured, was promoted against a backdrop of common dislike. But in reality the hate and disdain was only harbored by Joe Frazier. Although Ali often mocked Joe, he actually liked him and always had a twinkle in his eye while going through his routine of deriding Frazier.

Arturo Gatti and Micky Ward had nothing but respect for each other. Evander Holyfield and Riddick Bowe appeared on talk shows together and gave interviews leading up to all three of their fights, leaving their hostility for the ring. In the Leonard-Duran trilogy, the hatred and resentment came from Roberto Duran, who despised the All-American image projected by Sugar Ray Leonard. Leonard was more put off by Duran than actually having dislike for him. And the outward hostility between them only existed in their first two bouts in 1980. Their third fight nine years later lacked the anticipation and drama that surrounded the first two.

Erik Morales and Marco Antonio Barrera are a different story and have a genuine dislike for each other that extends beyond the 24 rounds they fought trying to conquer each other in the ring. The animosity first surfaced when Barrera called Morales an Indian on a Mexican television station prior to their first fight in 2000. It escalated when Morales called Barrera a homosexual while promoting their rematch in 2002, which led Barrera to cold cock Morales at a later news conference in Houston. On top of that, you have two proud hall-of-fame Mexican

fighters who are fighting to etch their names in history with the other all-time greats from south of the border. Fighters like Carlos Zarate, Salvador Sanchez, and Julio Caesar Chavez, just to name a few.

If that wasn't enough, this past Tuesday Barrera added insult to injury when he skipped a Beverly Hills news conference promoting their upcoming rubber match. This led Morales' promoter, Bob Arum to have someone dress in a chicken suit and represent themself as Barrera during the conference. This happens to be one of the rare fights that represents everything good in boxing, and it didn't need Arum's childish stunt to hype it.

The 28 year old Morales has beaten current or former world champions in each of his last three fights, and he is one of the best pound-for-pound fighters in the world. He is a three time WBC champion at 122, 126, and 130 pounds, and is 18-1 in championship fights. The 30 year old Barrera is a two time champion, winning world titles at 122 and 126 pounds. Barrera is 17-3 in world title fights and will be fighting for the first time in his career at 130 pounds when he faces Morales tonight.

In separate conference calls this week, Morales said, "this is the weight I should have been fighting a long time ago. I'm a more complete fighter at 130; this is a good weight for me. I'm going to be stronger. I'm going to be able to do more things that I couldn't do because of the weight."

In a later conference call from his training camp in Big Bear, Barrera said his greater heart will offset whatever advantage Morales may have at 130. When Barrera's remark about heart got back to Morales, he took one final shot at his bitter rival and said, "You've seen my fights. I never have ended up with my face on the ground as he has." Morales was obviously referring to Barrera being stopped by Manny Pacquiao last November and knockdowns earlier in his career at the hands of Junior Jones.

After two epic battles there isn't much to choose between Morales and Barrera, the fights have been that close. Because of their contrast in styles, this fight will most likely be a struggle again, regardless of who comes out on top. However, I believe a case can me made for Morales in this rubber match more so than one could have been made for either fighter before their first and second fights.

In his last title fight, Barrera endured a beating for 10 rounds before finally being stopped in the 11th by Manny Pacquiao. I don't believe Barrera is the same fighter now that he was this time last year. On top of that, Barrera is fighting in unchartered water as this is his first time fighting at 130 pounds.

On the other hand, the taller and rangy Morales seems to be more comfortable at the higher weight and has shown to be one of the rare fighters who has carried his punch as he's moved up. Both fighters are versatile and capable of boxing at a measured pace or going to war if they have too. However, due to the pounding Barrera took from Pacquiao, and the fact they are fighting at the higher weight, it's not likely he can win this time if he's forced to slug and trade with Morales.

That means for Barrera to win, he has to out-box Morales over 12 long rounds. Something that will be very hard to do against an opponent who is a better puncher, has a longer reach and who likes to pressure his opponents. It would be a monumental task for a prime Barrera, let alone one who enters the ring with Morales with what many believe are diminishing skills. That being said, because of his huge heart and championship pedigree, Barrera cannot be counted out. And we cannot forget that his opponent is Erik Morales. If there is one great fight left in Barrera, Morales is the fighter most like to bring it out.

Many things are riding on the outcome of Morales-Barrera III for both fighters. Another title for Barrera or the chance for Morales to add to his gaudy record in title fights. Their legacies and place in history will be altered by the outcome of this fight. The winner will be in line for another pay per view super fight in 2005. And both fighters are aware that history will recognize the winner of the rubber match as the better fighter.

After Barrera was announced the winner in their rematch, he walked over to Morales, shook his hand and he told Morales, "It, " meaning the feud, "is over.” Morales said OK, but apparently didn't mean it."

Forget the title, money, legacy, and place in history. Both Barrera and Morales are out to prove who is the better man and fighter.

That's why Morales-Barrera III will be remembered as the most important and significant fight between the two. There is one thing riding on it that only a few can relate to. For in the rubber match, Morales and Barrera will be fighting for the championship of each other.