Written by Frank Lotierzo
Sunday, 12 September 2004 18:00

As the Hopkins-De La Hoya fight approaches, everyone is trying to formulate the different scenarios as to how the fight will turn out. However, something recently occurred to me regarding Oscar De La Hoya. That is, if he somehow pulls off the upset and hands Hopkins his first defeat in over 11 years, he will be thought of and most likely go down as an all-time great fighter in the eyes of many. Whether he is worthy of that high praise or not, he will have made a pretty good case for his name to be included in such conversations. It's mind-boggling what a win over Hopkins would do for De La Hoya's career status.

Before getting into that, I want to make a few things clear about De La Hoya the fighter, as I see them prior to him fighting Hopkins. In my opinion Oscar De La Hoya is an outstanding/great fighter. However, I must admit that the word great doesn't flow freely from my lips when it comes to Oscar.

De La Hoya is tough mentally and physically, and has a big heart to go along with a very good chin. Oscar is also a very versatile fighter, capable of changing his fighting style to better match up with certain opponents. Another thing that can be said with impunity about De La Hoya is that he fought the best of his era and never avoided any fighter who was a perceived threat.

There is one period of De La Hoya's career on which my stand places me in the minority. Unlike a majority of writers and fans, I don't give De La Hoya the props others do regarding his multiple weight titles. In my opinion, he was never a legitimate Jr. Lightweight or Lightweight. De La Hoya sucked down to those weights and weighed in three days before a lot of those fights. He was at those weights for all of three seconds. Denying this is ignoring the truth. As far as I'm concerned, those titles were orchestrated from day one to manipulate De La Hoya's legacy as a multi division Champion. In those fights from 130-140, he won them on the scale and was unquestionably the bigger fighter in every one of them.

The best fighters De La Hoya faced were from 147 up. And that's where it gets tricky. Although De La Hoya has never been dominated or stopped, the only top fighter he defeated convincingly was Fernando Vargas. That being said, he did win the fight. I don't care that he struggled and was hurt during it. He won. Hopkins, Hagler, Leonard, and Hearns struggled against some of their best opponents before finally taking over and winning in a convincing fashion.

As regards the so-called signature fights of De La Hoya's career is where it becomes a matter of perception, since just about all of them came down to the wire. Against Pernell Whitaker, he won a comfortable decision on the judges' cards. The problem is anyone who watched the fight with both eyes open knows it was very close and could've gone to either fighter by a point, (I scored it a draw 6-6 in rounds). The problem is De La Hoya didn't prove he was the better fighter, not that Whitaker did, but this is about De La Hoya. In his fight with Ike Quartey, it was close and came down to the last round. But De La Hoya didn't convince all that he merited the decision he was awarded, (I scored the fight 6-6 in rounds, but gave De La Hoya a 2-point 12th round which tilted the fight to him by a point).

In his next big fight versus Felix Trinidad, the fight created more questions than it answered. I had the fight 7-5 De La Hoya or 1115-113. I don't care what anyone says, De La Hoya was up 7-2 after 9 rounds. The 10th was very close and could've gone to either fighter. Trinidad won the last two rounds, no doubt about it, but it's not like he beat up or shook De La Hoya in them. As far as I'm concerned, there is no controversy over this fight, De La Hoya won it. The problem is Trinidad was awarded the decision and many agreed with it. Again, nothing was resolved. De La Hoya didn't prove he was the better fighter, even to me. I just think he was a little sharper that night, but wasn't swayed that if they fought again De La Hoya would win.

In his next major fight he fought former Lightweight Champ Shane Mosley and lost a split decision. I don't know how it was only a split decision. I had it 7-5 or 115-113 Mosley. It's not like Mosley took De La Hoya apart, but he was the better fighter that night and definitely earned and deserved the decision. After losing to Mosley, De La Hoya stopped an in shape and focused Fernando Vargas. As stated earlier, this is De La Hoya's most complete win versus a top fighter.

A year after Vargas, De La Hoya fought Mosley again. Just as in the other big fights of Oscar's career, nothing was resolved. Mosley won a unanimous decision over De La Hoya in a fight that was interpreted differently by those sitting ringside and those watching on T.V. This was a very close fight, that I scored 7-5 for De La Hoya. The point is, despite thinking De La Hoya out-pointed Mosley in their rematch, once again he didn't prove he was the better fighter.

After losing the rematch to Mosley, De La Hoya challenged Felix Sturm for the WBO Middleweight title. The Sturm fight was the continuation of De La Hoya struggling against the better fighters he's faced. Although De La Hoya won the fight, many feel he was awarded a gift so the Hopkins fight could be made. Against Sturm, I had De La Hoya winning by a point. In my opinion, Sturm started letting his hands go a round or two too late.

One of the many reasons De La Hoya is such a lightning rod is because in his fights against the best fighters he's fought, he's left a lot on the table to be scrutinized. Other than against Vargas, De La Hoya hasn't defeated the top fighters on his record without some controversy, like Sugar Ray Leonard and Thomas Hearns did. This is why Hopkins is such a monumental fight for De La Hoya.

In Hopkins, De La Hoya can almost rewrite his career perception with a win. I haven't a doubt that if De La Hoya were to somehow beat Hopkins, his historical ranking would skyrocket. A win over Hopkins would be what De La Hoya would be most remembered for, especially if he retired and never fought again. It's almost unbelievable how off of one fight, De La Hoya could be catapulted into an all-time great, something that isn't really a thought pre-Hopkins.

Beating Hopkins, who has not lost a fight in 11 years, would give De La Hoya bragging rights beyond reproach. Think about it, Oscar gets exceptional press as it is. Imagine him moving up 6 weight classes and beating the undisputed middleweight champ, who has made a record 18 title defenses, and was considered no less than one of the three top pound-for-pound fighters in the world.

Look at the upside Hopkins represents for De La Hoya. Here's a fighter, De La Hoya, who it can be said lost to Whitaker, Quartey, Trinidad, Mosley twice and Sturm without it being a stretch. Yet if he beats Hopkins, many will look back and revise history, suggesting De La Hoya really won all those close fights.

If Hopkins were to be upset by De La Hoya, everything he's accomplished during his nine year title reign would most likely be overshadowed by the loss. And De La Hoya sits at the other end of the universe. A De La Hoya upset will most likely propel him to an historical ranking he may not really deserve.

Just by beating Hopkins, De La Hoya can essentially beat Whitaker, Quartey, Trinidad, Mosley and Strum all on the same night. Defeating Hopkins will virtually wipe the slate clean for De La Hoya in the eye of many fans. They'll forget that he struggled and may have been defeated by the top fighters he fought prior to Hopkins. What they will remember and talk about is that he beat Hopkins.

What a great position De La Hoya is currently in. In one fight he is positioned to virtually alter the entire body of his career.