

Golden Boy Oscar De La Hoya Has Lost Some Shine

Written by Tim Graham

Monday, 13 September 2004 18:00

Transfixed, I sat there in splendor. If I hadn't been keeping score I might have lost track of the rounds. I was mesmerized, sitting a couple dozen feet from the ring as Oscar De La Hoya looked about as perfect as a young prizefighter could.

By January 1997 De La Hoya already had become boxing's matinee idol. He was the Golden Boy, handsome, articulate, charismatic. He tugged at America's heartstrings when he lost his mother to cancer before the Barcelona Olympics yet forged onward to hear the Star Spangled Banner played in his honor. It was no wonder ladies flocked to his fights.

Yet hype played no part in my admiration of this young stalwart. On this night it didn't have to.

De La Hoya looked like a machine against Miguel Angel Gonzalez at the Thomas & Mack Center in Las Vegas, and I didn't want the fight to end. When Michael Buffer announced the 12th round I recall feeling the same as I did at the end of a Bruce Springsteen concert, the Kentucky Derby or my first viewing of a Monty Python film: exhilarated, but to a certain degree depressed the show couldn't last longer.

De La Hoya's destruction of a former champion -- granted a slightly faded former champion -- left quite an impression, one that would resurface whenever I was asked to predict the outcome a future De La Hoya bout. Pernell Whitaker, Ike Quartey, Felix Trinidad, Fernando Vargas, both Shane Mosley fights ... Each time I went with De La Hoya based on the impeccable skills and ring generalship I had witnessed not only against Gonzalez, but so many other times from ringside.

Clearly, I have long respected De La Hoya.

I also used to think Delta Burke was the most attractive woman I had ever seen. But, like De La Hoya, the heavier she got, the less glamorous she became.

That's why, for the first time since I originally saw him live a decade ago against Carl Griffith, I'm picking De La Hoya to lose. He doesn't stand a donut's chance in Ms. Burke's dressing room of beating Bernard Hopkins on Saturday night in the MGM Grand Garden.

As much as I have admired De La Hoya I have been as skeptical of Hopkins. This misguided soul has gone against the Executioner a few times in the past, not because I didn't recognize his awesome skill, but because logic insisted age eventually would catch up to him as he fought increasingly better opposition. I figured Trinidad would defeat him, and I thought there was quality betting value to be had with William Joppy.

Hopkins will turn 40 in January, but De La Hoya, who will be only 32 in February, has aged faster in recent years.

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De La Hoya's lopsided victory over Gonzalez nearly eight years ago was the last time the Golden Boy appeared flawless, a legend in the making without a blemish on his beaming face or his sterling ring reputation.

Three months later his next fight produced his first controversial verdict. He abandoned his 140-pound title to fight Whitaker for the 147-pound belt in Las Vegas. The judges awarded De La Hoya a unanimous decision, but the reaction across the country was mixed. Many reporters thought Whitaker was the victim of a "hometown" decision.

De La Hoya needed a split decision to get past Quartey in February 1999, and the champ's rakish good looks were getting more and more raked over.

Five years ago Trinidad finally tagged De La Hoya for a loss, which was every bit as controversial as Whitaker and Quartey combined. Trinidad won via majority decision, and it was justifiable. De La Hoya was the better fighter that night, but he gave away the victory by running in the final rounds.

In the 21st century the De La Hoya mystique has been knocked around like a shuttlecock. He continued to move up in weight but forgot to bring his power with him. Mosley, a fighter who has proven to be less than spectacular at times, beat De La Hoya twice.

Yet the worst indictment of De La Hoya's declining skills was his woefully sluggish performance against designated fall guy Felix Sturm three months ago. The bout was De La Hoya's 160-pound debut and, coupled with Hopkins' defeat of Robert Allen, was supposed to be an infomercial for Saturday night's pay-per-view.

De La Hoya was a 7-to-1 favorite yet looked incredibly ordinary against the lightly regarded, feather-fisted WBO middleweight champ. Sturm used a fabulous jab to control much of the fight. De La Hoya's head snapped back, his nose bled and his chest heaved.

He looked past his prime. He hardly resembled that sculpted warrior. He merely was a bloated Latino balladeer wearing a pair of boxing gloves.

Sturm's lack of power was obvious, but the German did land more punches than De La Hoya and threw fewer. If De La Hoya hadn't won the 12th round on all three scorecards the fight would have been a draw. Instead, he won by a unanimous 115-113 count.

Hopkins is far better than Sturm. Hopkins is one of the best middleweights in history. He has more power, more experience, more hunger. But the ex-con's biggest weapon has always been his guile. There's no doubt he will come into the ring totally prepared for anything De La Hoya can offer.

Part of Hopkins' training included studying films from De La Hoya's distant past as opposed to more recent fights such as Sturm, Mosley or Vargas. Hopkins plopped in tapes of an amateur De La Hoya facing Ivan Robinson and of a 135-pound De La Hoya taking on Jorge Paez and Rafael Ruelas.

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"This was De La Hoya when he didn't have \$200 million," Hopkins explained. "This was De La Hoya as he was stating his claim to the boxing world to be the future.

"To me, you can't get no better blueprint of a guy that's hungry, a guy that's not trying to make any mistakes, a guy that's not talking about rolling shoulders because he doesn't want to burn out in the later rounds because he don't want to use his legs, a guy that's gotta put his heart and soul into it.

"I look at those fights and look at the progress. I look at the decrease of early stages all the way up to the Felix Sturm fight. That gives me a blueprint how he has changed from being a guy that rarely [gets hit] to getting hit with everything but the kitchen sink now."

As Hopkins administers a beat down Saturday night, I'll be coming to grips with the fact I'll never again be mesmerized by watching De La Hoya -- not unless I locate some of those old tapes, too.