

De La Hoya-Hopkins One of the Greatest Fights I Ever Saw

Written by Rick Folstad

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Like blind dates, Super Bowls and your Christmas bonus, the biggest scare in this fight is that it doesn't live up to expectations. You don't want anyone to get seriously hurt, but you sure would like to see some kind of carnage before it's over.

Hopefully, the Bernard Hopkins - Oscar De La Hoya middleweight title fight at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas is one of those special events you'll tell your grandchildren about 25 years from now. You'll bounce them on your knee, pat them gently on the head and tell them about the great middleweight fight of 2004, kind of like telling them about the great flood of '74, or the devastating wildfires of '87.

You'll tell them to close their eyes and then you'll explain in a soft voice how you saw it all from the safety and comfort of the living room in your old, ranch-style house in the suburbs back when gas was only \$2.10 a gallon and they still printed and delivered newspapers.

"It was in September 2004, years before you kids were even born, and all my buddies were there that night to watch the pay-per-view fight," you'll say. "Your grandma - who was only 27 at the time - was in the kitchen making Buffalo wings for everyone, and we'd ordered four pizzas from Dominoes. Everyone chipped in 10 bucks for the food and the pay-per-view. That's what it was called back then, pay-per-view."

You'll tell your grandchildren how an aging, blue-collar fighter out of Philly was taking on a younger, flashier, better-known Californian who dabbled in music, TV and various lucrative promotional opportunities. It was the Executioner versus the Golden Boy, and everyone was talking about the fight.

"We had regular TV back then," you'll explain to them. "We had a wide-screen, high-definition, 97-incher and a remote. That's all we needed. It wasn't anything fancy like they have today with this three-dimensional stuff, but we didn't mind roughing it. We got by. Besides, you could see the fight from just about anywhere in the living room."

You'll explain to them how De La Hoya came out looking fit and trim, even at 155 pounds, and how he had tilted the scales in his favor before the fight ever started, stipulating that Hopkins must weigh in at 157, even though the weight limit at middleweight in those days was 160 pounds.

"You have to remember, twenty million was a lot of money back in those days," you'll say to them. "And De La Hoya's promoter, a man you kids have never heard of named Bob Arum, said there wouldn't be a fight unless certain criteria were met. Apparently, that meant a bigger ring so De La Hoya could dance, and the 157-pound limit for both fighters. Hopkins was used to coming in at 160. They even brought in two of the judges who gave De La Hoya the decision in his controversial win over Felix Sturm just a few months earlier. We called that a "stacked deck" back in those days, but that's just the way it was. If Hopkins wanted the fight and the big

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paycheck bad enough, he had to play by the rules as outlined by the De La Hoya camp. We figured even if De La Hoya won, his title would have some dirt on it."

You can tell your grandchildren how De La Hoya started strong and stayed up on his toes and out-boxed Hopkins in the early rounds using his superior speed. And how Hopkins, despite closing in on 40, kept in De La Hoya's face, trying to hunt him down.

"They both showed they had more than a little moxie that night," you'll tell your grandchildren as they start to fall asleep on your lap. "But the funny thing is, I don't remember who actually won that fight. I just remember it was one of the greatest fights I ever saw.

"Tomorrow night, I'm going to tell you kids the story of heavyweight legend James "Lights Out" Toney and what happened the night he fought Vitali Klitschko in a football stadium outside of Fresno. Now that was a fight."