

Credit De La Hoya for Going Out on his Shield

Written by Matthew Aguilar
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Oscar De La Hoya hasn't always been a favorite of the hard-core boxing fan. His pretty-boy looks and his appeal to the opposite sex often alienated the blue-collar bunch who didn't feel the "Golden Boy" was man enough.

But he may have earned some admiration even from his loudest critics Saturday after his performance against middleweight king, Bernard Hopkins. He was knocked out - but fought with uncommon courage before being hammered to the canvas by a bigger, stronger fighter.

Before the fight, most expected De La Hoya to hop on his bicycle and stay away from the menacing Hopkins, a la Sugar Ray Leonard against Marvin Hagler in 1987. Instead, De La Hoya stood and fought Hopkins. Some might question the intelligence of a gameplan that included squaring up against a larger man.

Some might even call it foolish.

But it nevertheless takes a mountain of guts to go mano-a-mano with a guy who is three inches taller and a good 10 pounds heavier. Early on, the pride of East L.A. pecked away with his still-splendid jab, flaunted some of that dazzling hand speed, and danced out of the way before Hopkins could get set.

It appeared that De La Hoya could have conceivably swept the first three rounds. It also seemed like Hopkins was hesitant - perhaps a result of all the considerable De La Hoya fanfare that bugged the purists so much. Whatever the reason, the "Executioner" seemed a bit bug-eyed. And, suddenly, an upset didn't seem so far-fetched.

Then reality set in.

Hopkins began to establish his own jab and started to sit down on his punches. He began to loosen up and time De La Hoya's flurries. And he began to establish his physical advantages. Those physical advantages included scoffing at De La Hoya's once-mighty punching power. At 130, 135 and even 147, De La Hoya's power was considerable. He was regarded as one of the hardest punchers in the sport.

But, at 154 and now 160, De La Hoya's punches were nothing more than a nuisance to Hopkins' advances. De La Hoya the destroyer had become De La Hoya the defenseless.

It must have been a sobering - and frightening - experience for a guy who is used to being the boss between the ropes.

But De La Hoya hung in there over the next three rounds, making a fight between a good big man and a good little man competitive because of skill, desire and a ton of heart.

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Once round seven arrived, De La Hoya had nothing substantial with which to defend himself. He chipped away, landing occasionally. But it was like throwing rocks at a Mack truck.

A bad ending for De La Hoya was inevitable.

De La Hoya was already well-faded when Hopkins dug in his vicious left to the body. If Fernando Vargas or Shane Mosley had landed that punch, De La Hoya might have survived. But Hopkins isn't Vargas or Mosley. The final sequence was the cumulative result of a small body caving under the effect of a 160-pound avalanche.

And down De La Hoya went.

Some have ignorantly suggested that De La Hoya quit. But anyone who has absorbed a left to the liver will tell you that unconsciousness is preferable to stifling, paralyzing pain.

Afterwards, De La Hoya was disappointed. But that he was disappointed didn't mean that he had been a disappointment. He simply met his match - against a guy who will go in the record books as perhaps the greatest 160-pounder of all time.

Besides the hard-core fight fans, De La Hoya hasn't always been a media favorite, either. He could be selfish and he could be self-absorbed. But even his critics have to commend him for bravely going out on his shield Saturday.