

Castillo vs. Diaz: A Battle of Wills

Written by Joey Knish
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Perhaps the best fight we will see all year comes this weekend as Showtime broadcasts the WBC lightweight title clash between Jose Luis Castillo and Julio Diaz, and it is absolutely free. Viewers simply need to tune into Showtime in order to witness a battle of wills as two of the world's top 135-pound fighters face-off.

The answer to who will win this fight comes down to which fighter can make it "their" fight. For the 31-year-old Castillo to win he will need to catch up to the younger Diaz and break him down, which is Castillo's standard modus operandi. Diaz must control the fight from the outside using his jab and movement to keep Castillo from attacking the body to halt that movement.

We have seen that Castillo (51-6-1, 45 KOs) does that, and does it well, but if an opponent maintains their focus on boxing and does not allow Castillo to catch up, the Mexican can spend an entire fight trying to close the gap. In his two most recent fights, Castillo needed close to half the fight before his power took its toll on world-class Joel Casamayor. Castillo took most of the late rounds to win a split decision. In the fight prior to that bout, it took roughly twelve minutes to wear down and batter Juan Lazcano to capture the WBC lightweight title.

Recent Diaz victories over Javier Jauregui (MD 12) and Courtney Burton (TKO 11) have shown that "The Kid," 25-years-old, is capable of executing the plan of "box-and-move" with success. Castillo, however, fights on a higher level than Burton or Jauregui. While many fans believed Diaz (30-2-0, 22 KOs) got the better of Angel Manfredy back in 2001, his stunning first round knockout defeat at the hands of Juan Valenzuela the following year is what has many fans wondering what will happen if or when Castillo catches him flush. This all depends on Diaz's being able to outwork and outbox Castillo for twelve rounds without making a mistake. It only takes one boobo to kiss a fight goodbye.

Pre-fight banter from Diaz suggests that he is not expecting the fight to last until the final bell. Ironically, it seems that a shorter fight would benefit the harder hitting Castillo. In a recent interview Julio Diaz was quoted as saying "it will be a great war and I do not think I have the patience for it to go the distance." Patience, young Diaz, is a virtue.

In addition to Julio Diaz being separated from his senses by Juan Valenzuela in 2002, he has been knocked down in three of his professional fights. Jose Luis Castillo, by contrast, has never been knocked down in his 58-fight career. While he has lost four fights by TKO, Castillo has only been stopped due to cuts, something a hit-and-move strategy from the hard-hitting Diaz could facilitate. But patience is the key to executing. Going to war with a fighter who will be bigger, stronger and has knocked out 45 of 51 opponents will not be the wisest route. Nor would it be the path of least resistance.

Since 1998, only Floyd Mayweather Jr. has been able to stick to a game plan against Jose Luis Castillo for 36 minutes, and even Mayweather hit some bumps in the road leaving the outcome in doubt. While nobody would suggest that Juan Diaz is as skilled a boxing technician as

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Mayweather, this weekend he may have to be.

In order to make this outstanding fight a reality, Diaz surrendered the IBF lightweight title that he worked so hard to gain. The IBF, in their infinite wisdom, has no #2 or #3 challengers for their champion, so they asked Diaz to fight their #4 rated lightweight, Levander Johnson, for the title. The reason for the IBF not ranking fighters in their top two spots - as is the case in most of their division ratings - lies somewhere between the idea they have that fighters should compete for the top spots, not just for titles, and if they sanction eliminators for the top rankings the IBF can collect more fees. Regardless, it leaves the IBF with a vacant lightweight title and their #3 and #4 ranked 135-pound fighters, Levander Johnson and Stefano Zoff, fighting in Italy in May for the IBF trinket. With respect to those fighters, I would include neither Johnson nor Zoff in the top-ten of the division. They are inferior to Diego Corrales, Jose Luis Castillo, Acelino Freitas, Julio Diaz, Juan Diaz, Joel Casamayor, Juan Lazcano, Ebo Elder, Javier Jauregui, Michael Clark and Artur Grigorian.

Anyhow, on to the fight.

Castillo was preparing for a showdown on with WBO champion Diego Corrales set for this weekend. The bout fell through as Corrales' management situation muddled the picture, leaving Castillo and Showtime with a date and looking for a partner. It didn't take much for Diaz to realize that bigger and better things could be come from a WBC title fight with the marquee Castillo than by taking a lesser fight for less money and holding onto his IBF belt. So he dropped the title, gained respect for fighting the best, and continued the training he had begun for the meeting with Johnson. New sparring partners were required, but the physical conditioning was the same.

With Castillo holding the cards as the bigger puncher and more experienced fighter with a higher level of opposition, Diaz may hold the biggest edge - in weight. Both men should make the 135-pound limit when it comes time to weigh-in. Come fight night, however, Castillo will be much bigger, as he has struggled to make the lightweight limit for several years now. He admits that he should be fighting at 140-pounds, but the lucrative matches keep coming his way at 135, so he continues to squeeze his way into a smaller man's body. Certainly Julio Diaz will be more comfortable making weight while Castillo stresses over each ounce he gains. Putting that much stress on the body will eventually catch up to a fighter, leaving them shot and physically drained by the time the bell rings. Castillo hopes this Saturday is not that night.

The Mandalay Bay in Las Vegas hosts the match and it has all the makings of an early Fight of the Year candidate. Jose Luis Castillo only knows that to win he must stalk and walk down his opponent and let his hands fly. Julio Diaz has never been in a bad fight and hopes that youth will be served this weekend.

Regardless of whose hand is raised the winners this weekend will be the fans. Two world-class boxers trading leather for a championship title on Showtime for free is too good a deal to miss.