

Can Fernando Vargas Still Take A Punch?

Written by Matthew Aguilar
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Fernando Vargas (24-2, 22 KOs) will get in the ring for the first time in a year this Saturday, March 26, taking on Raymond Joval (33-2, 15 KOs) in Corpus Christi, Texas, in a ten-round middleweight fight broadcast on HBO Boxing After Dark.

One of the questions Vargas is hoping to answer is whether he can still take a punch. Early in his career, Vargas' beard appeared solid, as he survived the power of Yory Boy Campas, Raul Marquez and Ike Quartey, among others. But he has suffered six knockdowns since his December 2000 war with Felix Trinidad, and fans are wondering whether his chin is still capable of absorbing punishment.

There have been fighters previously regarded as sturdy who, after a particularly devastating loss, never showed the same ability to take a punch.

Here are a few who suffered that fate . . .

John Tate: This giant Knoxville, Tenn., heavyweight took the division by storm in the late 1970s, beating the South African duo of Kallie Knoetze and Gerrie Coetzee to become a major player. The decision over Coetzee earned Tate the WBA crown vacated by the retired Muhammad Ali, and his future appeared bright. And though Tate's chin wasn't particularly tested, there was little indication that it was an issue - until March 31, 1980. That's when Tate dominated underdog Mike Weaver for 14 rounds. Then, with 45 seconds remaining in the fight, Weaver crashed a left hook into Tate's jaw and "Big John" sailed headfirst to the canvas. He didn't budge for several scary minutes, and his drawing power was severely hurt. In his next fight three months later, Tate picked unknown Trevor Berbick as his comeback opponent on the undercard of the first Roberto Duran-Sugar Ray Leonard fight in Montreal. And again he was knocked out cold, this time in the 9th round. He never came close to regaining his previous form, as his chin became too much of a liability. He died tragically in 1998.

Sean O'Grady: The popular 1980s lightweight was one of the more entertaining fighters of his generation, and he participated in some 70+ fights before challenging for a title. He lost controversially to England's Jim Watt for the WBC title in 1980 after a gash caused by a headbutt forced a stoppage. But he came back with a stirring decision over WBA titlist Hilmer Kenty in '81. It was a fight that showcased O'Grady's heart and, perhaps even more, his chin, as "Bubblegum Sean" survived the champ's best power shots to emerge victorious. After a bizarre year-long layoff that resulted in his being stripped of the title, O'Grady fought power puncher Andy Ganigan in what was expected to be a springboard to other things. But Ganigan had other ideas and destroyed a shell-shocked O'Grady in two rounds. The Tulsa native was never the same, and he was knocked out again by John Verderosa in 1983 before retiring. O'Grady later famously admitted in a KO Magazine interview that "all of a sudden, I couldn't take a punch."

Pipino Cuevas: The great Mexican left-hooking machine made 11 defenses of his WBA

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welterweight title from 1976 to '80, recording 10 brutal knockouts. His style was simple: Crank the left hook and keep cranking it until the opponent is sprawled on the deck. In the process, Cuevas had to absorb plenty of punishment in return, from some pretty decent opposition like Harold Weston, Angel Espada and Pete Ranzany. But his chin appeared to be granite, as he waded through the opponent's attack with a slanted-eyebrows sneer and winged bombs. But in August 1980, Cuevas met fellow power puncher Thomas Hearns in Hearns' native Detroit. After just two rounds, Hearns emerged victorious with one of the greatest punching displays in boxing history, dropping Cuevas with a devastating double-right hand. After that, Cuevas - and his chin - was never the same. He was dropped by Roger Stafford in 1981 and lost a decision. And he was massacred by fellow Latin legend Roberto Duran in '83. It seemed Cuevas' chin was irreparably cracked by Hearns' right hand.

Donald Curry: Curry was the opposite of Cuevas. Instead of brawling, Curry dissected his opponents with a surgeon's precision. He used a beautiful jab to unleash cat-quick combinations and stymied the return fire with an airtight defense. But when he was hit, he appeared to absorb the punches well enough. By 1985, experts were calling Curry the best fighter on the planet after a quick blitz of fellow welterweight champ Milton McCrory - and the big fight on the horizon was Curry vs. middleweight champ Marvin Hagler. But the "Cobra" was shocked by underdog Lloyd Honeyghan in 1986. He was staggered in the early rounds. Suddenly he appeared weak and frail, and his chin didn't look any harder than Jello. When Curry lost via sixth-round TKO, some called it a bad night for the Fort Worth native. And so Curry made a comeback and earned a shot at WBA junior middleweight champ Mike McCallum in 1987. It was an entertaining, world-class affair before McCallum crashed a wicked left hook to the side of Curry's face. Curry dropped as if shot, and was counted out with a blank look on his face. In a matter of months, Curry's chin went from dependable to nonexistent.

Meldrick Taylor: Though blessed with blinding hand and foot speed, Taylor was classic Philadelphia. He had the ability and skills to box and win decisions, but Taylor liked to mix it up. Even so, he dominated his opponents on his march through the 140-pound ranks. He knocked out talented champion Buddy McGirt for the IBF junior welterweight title in 1988, and some figured he would be to the 1990s what Sugar Ray Leonard was to the 1980s. But in March 1990, Taylor fought an all-time great slugfest with Mexican icon Julio Cesar Chavez . . . and got punished. Still, going into the 12th and final round, Taylor was ahead on points. All he had to do was stay away. But the Philadelphia in Taylor wouldn't let him, and so he fought Chavez. With less than 30 seconds to go in the fight, Chavez hurt Taylor with a right hand. Seconds later, Chavez dropped him. Taylor got up, but when he failed to answer referee Richard Steele, the fight was stopped with two seconds remaining. Taylor's career fell apart, due in part to his sudden inability to take a punch. He inexplicably moved up to 154 pounds to challenge Terry Norris in 1992 and was stopped in the fourth. By the time he figured 147 was his better weight, it was too late, and Venezuelan Crisanto Espana stopped him later in '92. Taylor was never the same after the career-altering loss to Chavez.

Will Vargas be the next Taylor, Curry, Cuevas, O'Grady or Tate? It's too early to tell, and an unknown like Joval may not have the skills to test a talent like "El Feroz." But eventually Vargas' chin will be hit. When that happens, we'll have our answer.