

Marco Antonio Barrera Burns Bright in El Paso

Written by Matthew Aguilar
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It wasn't that long ago that Marco Antonio Barrera was considered washed-up, a has-been, a fighter who turned pro young and predictably flamed out young.

But upon his arrival last week in El Paso before his defense of the WBC junior lightweight title against South Africa's Mzonke Fana this Saturday, there was little evidence of that seven-month hiatus from boxing's upper echelon in 2003. A throng of thousands showed up for a public workout at the Carolina Recreation Center in El Paso's Lower Valley, hoping to catch a glimpse of the three-time world champion.

Little boys struggled to climb on the apron of the ring, if only to put a tiny finger on Barrera's black, velvet boxing shoe before excitedly jumping back to his family to gloat about his brush with greatness. Middle-aged men held up signs proclaiming their affection for the Mexico City native, while couples young and old waited impatiently with boxing gloves and t-shirts and other assorted boxing memorabilia in hand - hoping for a signature from Barrera.

Indeed, a line of fans wanting autographs ran out of the door and through the hall before snaking around the corner of the Carolina Center - five, six, seven people deep in places. Barrera was able to sign his name countless times. But even great fighters with loads of stamina need rest.

After a 30-minute signing session, he apologized to those still in line, and made his way out of the building amid chaos. Even while answering media questions in his van outside, fans stuck their noses to the window, begging for Barrera's acknowledgement.

If there was any question whether the Mexican and Mexican-American communities considered Barrera great, this wild scene surely answered the question.

"It surprised me. I never imagined I had that many fans here in El Paso," Barrera said through an interpreter. "And that motivates me to put even more effort this April 9."

When asked whether his hand got tired from signing all the autographs, Barrera smiled.

"Yes, a little bit." he said. "I didn't expect that many people. But I'm very happy."

But don't expect the unflappable Barrera to be affected by all the attention.

Barrera trained in Big Bear - the mountaintop camp that his promoter Oscar De La Hoya made famous - longer than usual. He appeared primed for battle as he went through a 20-minute workout on the mitts dressed in a black sweatsuit.

He says he is ready for Fana, this unknown who is the WBC's #1 ranked contender.

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"We trained two weeks extra, because when you don't know too much about your opponent, it makes him that much more dangerous," Barrera said.

But Fana, top contender or not, is a bit player in this promotion that is dubbed "Viva Mexico!" in honor of Barrera. The recognized 130-pound champion is expected to do away with Fana with little problem.

This is really just a fight to keep the powers-that-be at the WBC happy. And to give Barrera something of a breather after his thrilling upset decision over Tijuana rival Erik Morales last November.

It's really Morales who is on the media's mind, since it is expected the two rivals will hook up for a fourth time after El Terrible's win over Filipino superstar Manny Pacquiao on March 19.

Though Barrera and Morales have expressed mutual hatred, they apparently still watch each other's fights.

"(Morales-Pacquiao) was a very good fight," Barrera said. "It didn't surprise me that Morales won. Morales has always demonstrated he's a great fighter and he just confirmed it with Manny Pacquiao."

But talk of Barrera-Morales IV will have to wait until after Saturday. Right now, there is only one guy on Barrera's mind.

The memory of his shocking defeat to underdog Pacquiao on Nov. 15, 2003 in San Antonio is still fresh in his mind. Pacquiao was the one who threatened to rob Barrera of his greatness. There were distractions aplenty leading up to that fight, and Barrera doesn't want Fana to be the 2005 version of Pacquiao.

"We're only thinking of Fana," Barrera said. "He's the number one rated opponent and that's where our concentration is. After April 9, maybe we can discuss who is next."

Who is next didn't much matter to the people of El Paso. They were just glad Barrera was in town to demonstrate some of his greatness.

As fans left imprints of their noses on Barrera's van windows, the loss to Pacquiao, and his hiatus from boxing's upper echelon, seemed a long time ago.