

Marco Antonio Barrera: What's Done . . . What's Left To Do

Written by Jake Donovan
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After fifteen plus years and sixty pro fights, most fighters would be winding down their careers, and reflecting on all that they accomplished over the years. Some would have long ago enjoyed their best moments and are either contemplating retirement or stubbornly hanging around, reluctantly forced to play the role of steppingstone for the next generation of fighters.

If there is one thing that **Marco Antonio Barrera** has proven throughout his career, it's that he is not like most fighters.

In an era where fighters are written off after one loss, and a complete write-off after a loss late in their career, Barrera has always defied the odds. Be it resurrecting his career after suffering a career-worst performance, or his one-man protest against the alphabet organizations, Barrera did things his way and has not only live to talk about it, but does so from atop the heap.

Many simply associate his name with that of longtime archrival **Erik Morales**. But his potential Hall of Fame career certainly extends further than the trilogy provided by two of Mexico's all-time greats. So with Barrera preparing for a title defense this weekend that won't change his place in his history one way or another, the time seems right to assess where Marco stands, where he came from and where he could possibly be heading.

Long before Morales even became a player in the lower weight classes, Barrera was carving out a name for himself on the Forum Boxing circuit. Often spotted in preliminary features on PPV cards headlined by a pair of Gonzalez's – Miguel Angel and Chiquita – many knew as early as his dominant points win over Daniel Jiminez that the "Baby Faced Assassin" was a star in the making.

HBO knew the moment he steamrolled through Eddie Croft beneath the Riddick Bowe – Evander Holyfield rubber match in November 1995. To quote Jim Lampley from that evening, "Marco Antonio Barrera... you'll be seeing A LOT more of him in the near future."

Lampley called it right on the nose; three months later, "Boxing After Dark" debuted. Barrera was the headliner, and twelve brutal yet breathtaking rounds with former junior featherweight champion **Kennedy McKinney** turned him into an overnight star. *The Ring* magazine – in the same issue in which they ranked the top fifty fighters of the past fifty years – ran a story on that fight. The title: "Greatness Confirmed."

Toward year's end, Barrera was one more big win away from stating his case for being 1996's Fighter of the Year. He had made three more title defenses after the McKinney fight, giving him an incredible eight defenses in just eighteen months! A November defense against former bantamweight champion Junior Jones was all that remained on Barrera's calendar. Rumor had it at the time that even Jones' camp considered the fight to be a foregone conclusion. So much so that his management team didn't even take a cut of his purse. The fight was to be a fond farewell for "Poison," and grounds to begin comparing Barrera to the greatest Mexican fighters

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of all time.

HBO started before anyone else, with references to the late great Salvador Sanchez made throughout the pre-fight showcase segment. Five rounds and a bunch of **Junior Jones** right hands later, HBO was made to look the fool. Barrera, whom many had ranked as high as top five in their pound for pound rankings, watched his Fighter of the Year honors go flying out the window as he hit the deck twice en route to getting stopped (it was officially a disqualification as Barrera's corner supposedly entered the ring before the bell to end the fifth round) against the born again – in and out of the ring – Junior Jones. Barrera's star fizzled, while Junior kicked off what would be a clean sweep for the Joneses that night, with Roy winning the interim WBC light heavyweight title in the main event.

The rebuilding process began immediately, and it showed a different side of Barrera, one that can box in a controlled manner. Marco made all the right adjustments in the rematch, boxing beautifully for six rounds, while remaining poised and composed throughout. However, Jones made adjustments of his own midway through, and took advantage of a suddenly complacent Barrera, who simply stopped throwing punches over the course of the final six rounds. When all was said and done, Barrera left the ring a loser for the second straight time after tearing through forty-three previous foes.

After the rematch, people began to doubt whether Marco could come back, even though he was a mere twenty-three years old at the time. It was suggested that he fought as well as he could, but that he could never beat Junior Jones. And that the age wasn't what needed to be looked at; it was the fact that he was already in his ninth year as a pro, and perhaps may have already peaked.

The comeback Marco embarked upon became one of three things in which Barrera would go on to be remembered for:

- Always finding a way to return to the top no matter how many chose to write him off
- Never allowing the politics of the sport to stand in the way of his goals
- Never letting them see him smile.

So when six straight wins would lead Barrera to Morales, who by now had begun to hit his groove as one of the sport's premier fighters, the boxing world knew that an all-time great would emerge from the rubble. Twelve rounds and a controversial decision later, many believed that the fight, while confirming greatness both ways, might have very well ruined both fighters.

Barrera's subsequent fights against mid-level competition led featherweight phenom **Naseem Hamed** and his team to believe that he was in fact ruined from the epic war with Morales. Desperate to score a high-profile name, Team Hamed decided that Marco carried enough name value to sell to HBO as a PPV fight. What they were banking on was Barrera being valuable **ONLY** in name.

But once again in a Las Vegas ring, Marco managed to pound out a career resurrecting – and defining – performance, dominating Hamed from bell to bell en route to a clear cut unanimous decision. Those that questioned how much Barrera truly had left in the tank prior to that night

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were quickly convinced that he filled up and was ready to once again cruise.

Barrera's rebirth came at the perfect time; Morales had just finished going life and death with Guty Espadas, lifting the WBC featherweight title in a decision many viewed to be far worse than his controversial points win over Marco the year prior. A tougher-than-expected title defense against In Jin Chi now led people to believe that perhaps young Erik had already peaked, and perhaps he was now ripe for the taking against a resurgent Barrera.

The two were reacquainted in December 2001, at a press conference announcing their April 2002 rematch. It was there that the bad blood between the two was showcased at its most hostile. After trading insults, Barrera took a cheap shot at Morales, forcing both camps to intervene. The rematch couldn't come soon enough. So naturally, an injury forced a two-month postponement.

Fast forward to June. One of the more shocking developments in this fight was the fact that neither came close to resembling the firing-breathing dragons we all came to know and love. The result was a sequel far less entertaining than the original, with a decision every bit as questionable. This time it went Barrera's way via unanimous decision. What made the decision such a bitter pill for most to swallow was the fact that, in addition to Morales seemingly having outfought Barrera, a blown call in the eighth round wound up costing Morales the fight. What appeared to be a knockdown was ruled a low blow. What should have been a 10-8 round for Morales wound up a 10-9 round for Barrera on all three cards. That three point swing became the difference between a second split decision win for Morales and the unanimous decision that wound up going to Marco.

The bout was for the WBC title, but Barrera passed, instead offering nothing but disdain for the organization. Instead, he was content to sport *The Ring* belt, and become HBO's poster child in its own war against the alphabets.

What he was not was bulletproof. Subsequent fights against faded former champs Johnny Tapia and Kevin Kelley left a bitter taste in everyone's mouth. More grumbling began when HBO announced that Barrera's next fight would be against 122-pound Filipino buzz saw Manny Pacquiao. Many viewed the bout as little more than Barrera attempting to cash in on a name while picking on a smaller fighter.

Going into the November 2003 fight, there were quite a few developments that Marco did not count on. He did not count on the San Diego brush fires forcing him to relocate training camp. He did not count on the "metal plate scandal", where reports of Barrera sporting a plate in his head as early as 1997 began to surface (thanks to ex-members of Team Barrera leaking the news to the media). Finally, he did not count on Pacquiao tearing through him for what still serves as the worst eleven rounds of his sixty-plus fight career.

And once again, fans did not count on Barrera to recover. How many times can he come back, we asked?

One year later, he forced us to revise the question: how many times can we prematurely write

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him off?

After retiring Paulie Ayala in June 2004, Marco looked to seek revenge against Pac Man. When such a rematch did not materialize, promoter Golden Boy Promotions went after another rematch – a rubber match, in fact. And once again, as Barrera was rebuilding, Morales was back on the rise. Having scooped up the WBC and IBF super featherweight titles, it was now Erik who was one win away from being anointed an all-time great. Barrera moving up in weight would be enough to do the trick, many figured.

When will the “experts” ever learn?

Back to Las Vegas, as Barrera and Morales played the strip a third time. The theme for the evening was “Once and for All.” After twelve of the best rounds of 2004, Barrera found himself in a familiar spot: back on top with yet another gigantic win.

This time, Barrera decided to back off from the political end. Rather than continue to voice his displeasures against the WBC, Marco instead left the ring as their champion. In fact, this weekend will be his first defense of a major world title (WBO notwithstanding). Not only that, but against a mandatory challenger (**Mzonke Fana**). Who would have thunk it? After years of campaigning against the WBC, he now wears their belt with pride.

Perhaps the defense this weekend is meaningless. It's certainly not worth spending \$40 to invest in the pay-per-view. But at least it gives fans more time to reflect on where Barrera stands in boxing history. Some suggest that he needs to avenge his loss to Pacquiao, even with Manny dropping a close yet seemingly clear decision to Morales three weeks ago. Others will suggest that perhaps a fourth fight with Morales is necessary. Barrera last year pulled ahead of Morales, who beat Pacquiao, who sixteen months prior beat Barrera. In a six degrees of separation kind of way, perhaps there is unfinished business between the two, even if Barrera has proven to be better than Morales in their best-of-three.

Whatever the case, fans can no longer dispute one thing: Barrera's rightful place in boxing history. The Ring magazine confirmed Barrera's greatness nine years ago. Barrera has now confirmed it at least twice more in the past four years.

With a move to lightweight most likely out of the question and unnecessary, all that is left for Barrera are fights which may prove to be anti-climactic in a historical sense. A win over Pacquiao does mean a little less with Manny losing to Barrera's arch nemesis. A fourth fight with Morales figures to be fun, but doesn't figure to offer much upside for Barrera. A fight with Juan Manuel Marquez would be nice, but it would be just as nice if Marquez did something – anything – to salvage any remaining drop of momentum from his thrilling draw with Pacquiao last May.

Perhaps he should become the type of fighter who winds down after fifteen years and sixty-plus pro fights. If it's come down to honoring mandatory defenses for previously long-despised alphabets, then it seems that Barrera may have run out of items to check off on his To-Do list.

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Simply put, Barrera's name is already affixed in boxing history. The search for the next Salvador Sanchez and Julio Cesar Chavez can all end. Marco is neither. Nor does he need to be.

He has accomplished enough throughout his career to where we can now begin to search for the next Marco Antonio Barrera.