

Here Stands Fernando Montiel

Written by Bill Knight
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Fernando Montiel is in an interesting place these days, standing in that most special of doorways - the doorway every fighter sees in his dreams.

The slick little fighter from Los Mochis, Mexico, is standing in that doorway that leads to boxing's most prized possessions. Fame. And fortune.

That is never an easy journey for those who dance around the flyweight division. Mexico loves its boxers and a fighter does not have to break the scales to win hearts south of the border. Still, at 112 in his early fights and now at 115, Montiel will have to bring something special into center ring.

He is on the verge.

The legends of Mexico, the modern day heroes, have ranged from featherweights like Salvador Sanchez to the forever beloved Julio Cesar Chavez. Marco Antonio Barrera and Erik Morales are stepping into that special spotlight, too.

Montiel is resting these days, letting an injured hand heal and getting ready for that next challenge at 115-pounds. On a March evening in El Paso, he earned that rest. He also might have moved himself into that doorway.

He was almost untouchable against undefeated WBO super flyweight champion Ivan Hernandez on that warm March night. He floated in, landing quick combinations. He zoomed out, relying on his fast feet to deliver him from the danger zone. Montiel appeared on his way to a near shutout decision. Then, though, he showed his power. He dropped Hernandez in the sixth. In the seventh, Hernandez charged and appeared to be finding the range when Montiel launched a left to the liver, dropping the champion in a heap. Hernandez barely beat the count, but only delayed the inevitable. Moments later Montiel unleashed another of those paralyzing lefts to the body ... leaving

Hernandez on the canvas, wondering if there was any air left in the arena.

Montiel has now worked his way to a polished 30-1-1 record. His only setback was that poor outing against Mark Johnson, a late-starting effort that cost him a majority decision and his 115-pound WBO belt. Hernandez took that belt from Johnson last September with an eighth round knockout.

And so here stands Montiel.

He is 26 now and he is smooth and polished outside the ring, showing a touch of flair and looking every bit as slick in a suit and tie as he does making his moves in the ring. He has also recognized what must happen to be a true Mexican boxing hero. He has come to the United

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States. Eight of his last nine fights have been in the U.S."It is definitely important for me to make a big name in the United States because the big fights are here, not to mention the big purses," he said.

And here, under the bright lights and scrutiny of millions, is where legends are made.

Montiel's promoter is someone who knows more than a little about storming through that doorway. Oscar De La Hoya watched Montiel dismantle Hernandez, and then said, "Fernando is a champion who keeps on impressing me over and over and over again. I told him he reminded me of me when I fought (Julio Cesar) Chavez - the focus, the determination. He is still a young man and I just feel he can be a world champion for a very, very long time."

He is and he can.

But to step through that doorway, to move into that special place in the heart where Mexico places its most beloved fighters, Montiel will have to continue performances like the one against Hernandez. He cannot afford another performance like the one against Johnson. Perhaps he will need a special adversary - a Morales to his Barrera.

Perhaps not. Only time will tell.

For now, though, one thing is certain. Montiel is standing in that most special of places, the place where every fighter who has ever wrapped his fists, laced on the gloves and eaten a left hook has dreamed of standing.

Fernando Montiel is standing in that doorway.