

“The Contender” Crowns a Champion

Written by Randy Gordon
Tuesday, 24 May 2005 19:00

The journey which began late in 2004 came to an end for “The Contender” on May 24 at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas, Nevada, when the show’s final bout was held.

In a seven-round bout so packed with action that it’s a sure bet to make it onto 2005’s list of “Fights of the Year,” Sergio “The Latin Snake” Mora won a unanimous decision against Peter Manfredo Jr. In victory, Mora won not only “The Contender” title belt, but the million dollar grand prize that went with it.

The capacity crowd at Caesars Arena, which had such celebrities as Cameron Diaz, James Caan and James Brolin in attendance, were treated to an incredible evening of boxing, including an exciting evening of undercard matches featuring eight of the 16 fighters who began “The Contender” journey.

NBC-TV aired the special two-hour “Contender” finale, going head-to-head against a heavyweight champion, the powerful “American Idol,” which was expected to attract an audience of nearly 33 million viewers. NBC used veteran sportscaster Al Trautwig as host, blow-by-blow announcer and interviewer. “Contender” hosts Sylvester Stallone and Sugar Ray Leonard served as color analysts. Unfortunately, audio problems garbled and distorted many of their words, the only negative on an otherwise entertaining and thrilling night of live televised boxing.

In the show’s opening bout, which had been taped earlier, runners-up Alfonso Gomez and Jesse Brinkley squared off in a bout for third-place honors. Manfredo earned his place in the finals by winning a decision against Gomez—whom he had lost to in the first bout of the series—and Mora punched his way into the finals with a decision over Brinkley. The rugged Manfredo was voted back onto the show by the other contestants when one of them—Jeff Frazz—was forced to leave the show with a case of chickenpox. In a bout which was a table-setter for the Mora-Manfredo bout, Gomez and Brinkley did themselves proud in a five-round bout which put each man’s huge heart on display. When it was over, Gomez was awarded a unanimous decision by a score of 49-46 and identical scores of 48-47.

Then came the main event. And what a main event it was!

Mora-Manfredo was seven rounds of nonstop action, with every round more exciting than the one before it.

In the very first round, Mora, 159, from East Los Angeles, CA, suffered a small cut above his left eye, possibly from a sharp right from Manfredo (a replay of what caused the cut wasn’t shown). After that, round two looked like round three, which looked like round four, which looked round five...

Mora fought with his back to the ropes much of the time, but did so effectively with fast inside

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flurries and sharp punches to the head. All the while, the tough Manfredo, 159, from Providence, RI, lowered his head, bulled his way inside and threw hard punches both to the head and body.

With the fight very close going into the fifth round, Mora seemed to get stronger. In that fifth stanza, Mora fought effectively from both the orthodox stance as well as from the southpaw stance.

In the sixth, Mora pinned Manfredo in a corner early in the round, only to have Manfredo power his way out with powerful lefts and rights. At the closing bell, Mora looked stronger, even as blood streamed from a cut above his left eye.

The crowd gave both a well deserved, standing ovation at the final bell. Then they waited for the final decision. Unanimously, all three judges went for the winner, Sergio “The Snake” Mora. The winner had said all along that he was fighting so his mother, who had worked extremely hard all her life, could finally retire.

In the undercard fights, Jimmy Lange raised his record to 25-2-1 (17 KOs) with a majority five-round decision against veteran Tarik Salmaci, who drops to 19-3 (5). The scores were 49-45 (twice) and 47-47.

In a spirited affair, Ishe Smith won a unanimous decision over Anthony Bonsante by identical scores of 49-43. Ishe is now 16-1 (7) while Bonsante drops to 26-6-3 (15).

Jeff Fraza, who had to leave the show because of a case of chickenpox—before ever getting to fight—won a split-decision over Brent Cooper. Two of the Las Vegas judges had it 49-46 for Fraza, while one incredibly had it 48-47 for Cooper.

Although Stallone has said that he has been told by NBC executives there will be no second season of “The Contender,” the show was actually quite entertaining and saw its ratings climb as the weeks went on.

“The Contender” is over.

But what a season it was!

Don't count to 10 over “The Contender” just yet!