

Chavez Jr. vs. De La Hoya: Payback Time?

Written by Matthew Aguilar
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It's no secret that among hardcore Mexican boxing fans, Oscar De La Hoya isn't the hero he is in the United States.

Mexican fight fans like their heroes stoic and dignified, without flash, arrogance or bravado.

Pipino Cuevas. Ruben Olivares. Julio Cesar Chavez. They were the very essence of Mexican boxing.

Even a Mexican-American like Bobby Chacon became a Mexican favorite because of his courage.

De La Hoya, like Chacon, was a Californian. But they couldn't have been more different.

The Golden Boy's nickname fit: He always seemed a little too polished, a little too cute, a little too marketed.

But all that would've likely been tolerated - and Oscar would likely have been accepted - had De La Hoya simply steered clear of an aging, vulnerable Chavez, Mexico's resident boxing god.

At one time, Chavez was the deadliest fighting machine in the boxing, using a methodical, punishing style to dominate three divisions worth of the best fighters of his era. A young De La Hoya says he idolized this Chavez - as millions of others did.

But Chavez had slowed considerably by the mid-1990s — drawing with Pernell Whitaker, losing for the first time to Frankie Randall, and squeaking out victories over unspectacular opposition like David Kamau.

It just so happened that his demise coincided with De La Hoya's rise.

The "Golden Boy" could have avoided the fight. He could have proclaimed that fighting his idol would be disrespectful to the legend.

But slaying Chavez also meant big bucks and bigger prestige for boxing's new star.

So the fight was signed for June 7, 1996.

Predictably, it was a massacre. De La Hoya proved too big, too fast and too young for Chavez, and registered a fourth round technical knockout. In the end, there was Chavez, smeared with his own blood and looking nothing like the fighter who rattled off so many consecutive victories before sustaining a loss.

If De La Hoya was disliked before, he was despised now.

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A couple of years later, Chavez foolishly convinced himself that he could beat De La Hoya. And though he gave him a better fight in their September 1998 rematch, it was a hopeless cause. And Chavez sustained more punishment.

He was rocked in the eighth round by a whale of a left hook and surrendered on his stool a few minutes later – kicking the bottom rope in frustration.

There were bruises around his eyes. His lip was the size of the Hindenburg. And he was spitting blood.

His fans felt worse. They were weeping.

On the other side of the ring, there was a fired-up De La Hoya, pumping his hips and celebrating his victory with glee – almost gloating.

The years have passed, but the beating De La Hoya handed Chavez is still a sore spot for Mexican fight fans. Even in his later fights with Ike Quartey and Felix Trinidad and Mosley, De La Hoya was never completely accepted.

He alienated himself when he pounded their hero.

Think maybe Mexico wants some payback?

In action tonight - on the undercard of his father's farewell performance, no less - will be Julio Cesar Chavez Jr., the 19-year-old son of "J.C. Superstar." Junior had no amateur experience, and as a result is as green as grass.

But the kid has displayed unmistakable boxing genes in building a 19-0 (13 knockouts) record.

When he stalks his opponent, he looks like his dad. When he fires that left to the body, he looks like his dad. And when he moves in for the kill, he looks like his dad.

His punches are crisp and accurate. His conditioning is immaculate. And he displays a cool, calm demeanor.

Just like his dad.

Coincidentally, the 32-year-old De La Hoya is aging.

He lost his last fight, via knockout to middleweight champ Bernard Hopkins. He lost to Shane Mosley two fights before that. He is fluctuating in weight, and is more businessman than boxer these days.

He is close to the end ... much like Chavez Sr. back in 1996.

Still, De La Hoya-Chavez 3 – pitting Oscar and Julio Jr. – may be a possibility.

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Consider: Chavez Jr. is bigger than his dad at 5-foot-10½ and 140 pounds. His management team is waiting for him to develop physically before matching him with stiffer competition. In two years, he'll be 21 years old, around 35-0 after destroying a collection of ham-and-egggers, and a few world-class campaigners.

He may even have picked up a world title by then, considering the pace he's set so far. And he'll likely weigh between 154 and 160 pounds.

De La Hoya, meanwhile, will be 34, perhaps 2-1 in his last three fights, and will weigh between 154 and 160 pounds.

Talk about a natural.

De La Hoya may well be retired then. But that may prove to be immaterial. When there's a challenge beckoning, an announced retirement is about as useful as a 5-year-old jock. And, didn't Oscar once say he wanted to be out of the sport by the time he was 30?

Fighters fight. De La Hoya may want it more than anybody, to prove that he can still do it. To prove that he is a great fighter. To give himself a fitting farewell.

Details tend to be worked out when there's a grudge to be settled. And money to be made.

For Mexican fight fans, it won't really matter that De La Hoya will be faded and past his prime. They won't care that he won't have the reflexes that marked his best days.

They'll just want some payback.

It'll be fascinating to see whether they get it.