

Young and the Restless Julio Diaz Ready to Rumble

Written by Jake Donovan
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For former lightweight champion Julio “The Kidd” Diaz, losing is not the hardest part. It’s the downtime before the next fight after a loss that hurts the most. With only three losses in his career, The Kidd has always made it a point to immediately bounce back and return to the ring as soon as possible. Coping with a loss always leaves a bad taste in his mouth; a fight and a win helps rinse it all out.

Such will be the case Tuesday night when Diaz returns for the first time since his tenth-round stoppage loss to Jose Luis Castillo on Showtime this past March. The stage on which he will perform is not nearly as gaudy, as he takes on Marco Angel Perez in the main event of ESPN’s Tuesday Night fights (10PM ET/7PM PT) live from Sycuan Casino in El Cajon, California.

For Diaz, all that matters is that he returns to the ring. Who he fights is not of concern – for now.

“I’m excited about returning to the ring,” says Diaz. “I wanted to come back as soon as possible, and my promoter (Sycuan Ringside Promotions) delivered. I’m just glad to get another opportunity to show everyone what I’m all about. I need the win for now, before making another run toward the best of the division.”

The most recent run ended with The Kidd bloodied and on the canvas twice against Castillo, before being forced to call it a night shortly before the end of the tenth round. The loss capped a frustrating few weeks for Diaz. He was stripped of his IBF lightweight title before the March contest for passing on a mandatory defense against battle-tested Leavander Johnson.

Ironically, Diaz’s nationally-televised fight will come one night after Johnson challenges former champion Steffano Zoff for that very belt in a vacant title match in Italy. By the time this goes online, Diaz will know who will have become the new owner of his title. No matter, says The Kidd. He still believed himself to be the champion heading into the fight with Castillo, and has his sights set on bigger fights.

“At the time, it bothered me that the IBF went that route,” recalls Diaz. “But you know what? I’d do it again in a heartbeat. Unfortunately I lost, but I learned more in a loss to a great fighter like Castillo than I would have in a mandatory title defense. I needed the big fight experience and am glad that I took it. Obviously, a win would have been better, but now I’m ready the next time a big fight presents itself.”

The first task on hand is knocking off Perez. Diaz admits to knowing little about his opponent. What he does know is that a victory provides something he’s been looking for the past three months: namely, peace of mind.

“I needed to come back right away. I hate being out of the ring with a loss sticking out as the last thing on my record,” Diaz says. ‘More important than getting back into contention, I just

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need to come back for myself. I can't relax or rest at home. I just want to be able to prove myself in the ring, and then rest at home afterward."

Followed, of course, by another run at a world title. Diaz served as IBF lightweight champion for about nine months before being stripped this past February. Unfortunately the reign came with a grand total of zero defenses. He defeated Javier Jauregui in May 2004, and then sat on ice for the rest of the year, awaiting a grand opportunity to come his way.

Instead, he heard the same song that seems to be sung throughout the industry. TV dates are sparse. Everybody likes you, but you're a fight or two away from calling the shots. Fight your mandatory, and then get back to us.

All of the aforementioned resulted in the longest layoff in The Kidd's career. This layoff comes on the heels of a nine-month gap from mid-2003 to March 2004, in which Diaz moved up the rankings before playing the waiting game. That was why he took the title fight with Juaregui a mere two months after stopping Courtney Burton on ESPN2 last March. It is also why he demands both quality and quality from here on out.

"Going into the Castillo fight, I hadn't fought in like ten months," says Diaz. "Not that it's an excuse. Jose Luis beat me fair and square and that's all there is to it. But I just didn't like the feeling of having not fought for so long before going into such a big fight. So now my goal is to stay active. I fight on Tuesday, and Sycuan said they have another date lined up for August. They delivered on this fight, in fact faster than even I expected it to happen. So I know they'll keep me busy. I just want it to lead to something big."

Nothing would be bigger than a showdown with consensus lightweight king Diego "Chico" Castillo, or even a rematch with Castillo. For Diaz, it doesn't matter which one happens. Some would suggest that avenging the Castillo loss should be first and foremost. Diaz disagrees, to an extent, anyway.

"It'd be great to get the chance to reverse that loss, but I won't become obsessed with it," Diaz insists. "My goal is to rule the lightweight division. Once I make my run back toward the top, if Castillo awaits me there, then great. If I get the chance to fight Corrales, of course I have to take that. Whatever big fight will help define my career, that will be the one I pursue. I'll take any fight along the way, as long as it leads to the top."

What he doesn't want is to travel a road filled with TBA's.

"This fight (tonight) – I need it. I need a win to rest, and to go into the summer knowing that my career is back on track. But I don't want it to become where I'm taking fights that get me nowhere. I was grateful for receiving the big fight experience against a tough, great vet like Castillo. But there is a lot going on at the lower weights now. I'll do what I have to do in the ring to remain a part of the mix. All I ask is that I'm given the opportunity to do it more often than has been the case in the past two years."

In other words, allow The Kidd to prove his manhood.

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Sycuan Ringside Notes: In more news from Sycuan Ringside Promotions, the purse bid for undefeated WBO super bantamweight champion **Joan Guzman's** mandatory defense has been postponed two weeks. The original purse bid was to take place June 8, but the WBO has rescheduled for June 22. Guzman's mandatory defense will be against undefeated Thai challenger

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. Should the bout land in the States, Sycuan is working feverishly to secure an ESPN2 date some time this summer ... Panama's

Mauricio Martinez

fights for the first time under the Sycuan banner, in an eight round bantamweight fight beneath Diaz-Perez tonight on ESPN2. The former WBO bantamweight champion takes on Reynaldo Antonio Hurtado Arendo. Martinez is rated #2 by the WBA and # 6 by the WBC. Sycuan recently signed Martinez to a multi-year deal, and hope to position him for a world title shot by the end of the year ... Fresh off of his close call against Armando Guerrero last Tuesday on ESPN2, IBF super bantamweight champion

Israel Vasquez

looks to return as early as mid-July. Rumors are flying abound as to who will appear in the opposite corner, but no confirmation as to who is the front runner as this article goes to print.