

## The Elephant in the Room (Corrales-Castillo Redux)

Written by Joe Rein

Tuesday, 02 August 2005 19:00

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'Be a clown. Be a clown. All the world loves a clown'...

All that was needed was baggy pants and pratfalls at the Beverly Hills Hotel press conference for World War II between Diego Corrales and Jose Luis Castillo for the WBC and WBO lightweight belts on October 8 in Vegas at the Thomas and Mack Center.

The media loved it. It was the Rat Pack at the Sands. One-liners ... Sports-bar ragging. Gary Shaw played lead promoter and Shecky Green. The teams traded laughs the way Corrales and Castillo traded punches two months earlier. Bada bing! It had all the rancor of a Dean Martin roast.

But it was a mask: gallows humor. "We have to make jokes," co-promoter Bob Arum said soberly, confronting the elephant in the room, "the tension is too strong. We wouldn't be able to stand it, so we make jokes, but we all know what hell it will be like on Oct 8."

It wasn't hyperbole, with the heat of the action several stories high on a screen behind him. If it'd been a video game, outraged parents would have replaced Mortal Combat to lobby congress.

It's good it was on a loop; so many had averted their eyes seeing it live. The ending was so melodramatic; it would have been rejected in the first draft of "Rocky."

It was in sharp contrast to what usually greets one at a presser: pounding hip-hop on a WWF in-your-face promo of the fiercest bits of the fighters MTV'd together with a mile-a-minute monster-truck voiceover.

All that was needed to sell this fight was the *actual footage* – no bells and whistles. Fred Sternburg, Shaw's publicist, understood well: less is more. Although, "John Henry's a steel-driv'n man" wouldn't have been inappropriate music.

Instead of final instructions from referee Tony Weeks, both fighters should have thrust a glove at the lens, "We who are about to die salute you!" For the next 40 minutes, the only thing missing were the lions. They didn't need gloves; axes would have sufficed. It's the first time both gladiators would have gotten a thumbs-up.

Guys as inured to violence as homicide cops entered the ballroom as if it was a cathedral, squinting – shaking their heads at the oversized images of Corrales and Castillo pistoning their arms like roustabouts racing to drive tent pegs. Nothing missed the mark or drained either man's will. It wasn't a prizefight; it was a pain-tolerance test.

Scribes and sparring partners, who give nobody slack, were humbled.

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As Sugar Ray Leonard said to Chico, giving him a big hug, at the finals of The Contender, “Well, you’re in the club now – the guys who’ve made history and will be talked about for decades.”

Neither Corrales nor Castillo, in the midst of well-wishers before the presser began, would have been mistaken for the heroic figures of gristle and bone locked in a battle for the ages above them.

Castillo, with a broad grin, in a loose red T-shirt, looked like a poster for Mexican tourism; the guy who’d *root* for Castillo, mow the lawn and invite you to a cookout – not the stuff of myths, or the need to be on stage.

Chico, his face fuller since the bout, slouched easily nearby with those that wanted a word, an autograph or a picture. He listened and smiled with his eyes. It was hard to connect him with the colossus that stood up round after round to body shots that would have splintered a door. He didn’t wear macho on his sleeve.

They may have blended as *everymen*, but they were *ubermenschen*, with that footage fresh in everyone’s mind.

Shaw introduced Fernando Beltran, Castillo’s manager – as well as Jorge Arce, and Eric Morales – emphasizing, “They’re not only Mexicans; they *fight* like Mexicans.”

Beltran returned the compliment: “Corrales is not a total Mexican, but he fights like a *total* Mexican.”... But, with a sly smile, added, “I did a little research. I would like to show you pictures – before and after,” holding up the smoking gun of an unmarked Castillo and a bruised and puffy Corrales.

“To win the *belts*, you must get the *welts*!” Shaw sloganed, waving a photo of Corrales with the championship belt. “*That’s the picture that means*

something to us! Your man is

*courageous*

, ours is the

*champion*

.” Chico nodded wordlessly.

“He just *borrowed* the belts,” Beltran shot back.

“I’m a stingy guy,” Corrales responded. “My daddy always told me, ‘You pay the *cos*’ to be the boss,” his voice more steely. “I paid the *cost* that night to be the BOSS, poking his picture with the belt. “I’m *not* giving it back! It’s *not* gonna be

relinquished! I’m not giving it up. I said hell or high water

*last time*

. I mean hell or high water

*THIS TIME!*”

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The buzz lessened, registering his remarks. Castillo's side lightened it up. Jose Luis, grinning like a waiter bringing a surprise birthday cake, presented Corrales with a box of mouthpieces, suggesting he illegally spit his out.

It was bound to come up. The laughter was a release. Photographers rushed the dais, shouting over each other in English and Spanish how they wanted the boxers to pose with them.

"You had a hand in it," a photographer called out to Goossen to get him to join the posing.

"I've been practicing with Diego spitting it out," Goossen ribbed back, and got the laugh.

When it bordered on chaos, Shaw brushed the lenses aside. "This is not a Playboy shoot!" and called up Diego's manager, James Prince, "who'll now talk a little smack and we'll get into Castillo's head"

Conjuring up Red Foxx, Prince said, "As I predicted, we would stop him, dissect him, put a little tenderizer on him, and then chew him up. We done that ...in *spectacular* fashion ... on his feet. I wish we had *that* picture."

"You ask and you will receive, "Shaw obliged, grandly, handing Prince a picture of Castillo sagging against the ropes. "*That's* a beautiful picture," Prince said, holding it high. "*His* mouthpiece gonna be out *this* time. So bring a pillow with you," he looked at Castillo.

Calling on Joe Goossen, his trainer, Shaw said, "I'd like to introduce the best-looking, best dressed guy who had those wonderful words during the 10th round. "Diego, you better do it *now*!"

"I don't want to tell you what I *really* said," Goossen cracked as he came to the mike. After Joe's glowing words about team-GSP and Chico, Shaw glanced sideways. "I hope that wasn't for a higher percentage?" he asked.

"Why don't you give him your tailor," a voice wisecracked to Goossen for Shaw's benefit. "We're the peoples' champion." The T-shirted Shaw stood up. "We don't have to dress fancy. We do our talkin' in the ring."

"When's Diego gonna start training, Gary?" another voice piped up. "He trains at the buffet with me." Rim shot.

As the room cleared, I asked Shaw – because of the fight – if he'd reflected on his place in history. "People talk about it as the fight of the decade," he said. "I know I co-promoted a great fight, but as a promoter, I always look forward, not back. I don't know that anybody understands their place in history until history is written."

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Focusing on making great matches, he's insuring his place.

At a time when promoters are using 'there's-a-sucker-born-every-minute' approach to PPV, Shaw gives value for the dollar, not a medicine show. He's put together what fans want, not what he wants to push.

Anybody with resin in their blood can't wait to see Corrales-Castillo II and a repeat of Fight-of-the-Year nominee Jorge Arce and Hussein Hussein – plus junior lightweights Jesus Chavez and Carlos Hernandez go at it a second time. Their bout stole the show on the Julio Cesar Chavez-Ivan Robinson card.

As I left, Shaw's words echoed in my ears: "I see the fight being the same way. They don't know how to fight any other way. Diego wanted to call it, 'The Eleventh Round.'"

The "hell" that Arum described is the crucible that defines both men.