

## Raheem, Morales, Sadness, Joy

Written by Bill Knight  
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Sadness and joy, wrapped in a ring.

There are occasional moments in the sport when the sadness and joy are muted, other times when it is all amplified. There are those moments where careers pass — one soaring up, another spiraling down. All in the same ring.

Only time will tell if Saturday night was one of those moments at the Staples Center in Los Angeles.

At the least, it was a bit stunning. And it was most certainly sadness and joy.

Erik Morales, supposedly getting a tune-up and a payday before moving on to bigger and better things, might have been exposed at 135 pounds ... and might have been exposed as a grand warrior who has gone to war too many times. Or, maybe it was one of those old boxing adages waltzing into the limelight — styles make fights.

Whatever the case, the sadness and joy were palpable Saturday night in a ring on the west coast.

Morales lost for the first time to someone other than Marco Antonio Barrera. Morales, for the first time, lost a decision that was not close ... dropped a decision that he thought could have gone his way. Judge Julie Lederman had the most accurate tally — 118-110 for Zahir Raheem. The other judges had it 116-112 and 115-113. But no matter what those cards read, it was not close.

And so Morales leaves this scene quietly, leaving a solemn Tijuana following in his wake. Morales carried the sadness on this September night. He made the walk into the ring with an arena full of cheers resonating, something special for his memory bank. He made the walk with unlimited jackpots dangling in his future. Whatever he wanted.

Morales-Corrales. Morales-Castillo. Morales-Pacquiao. Morales and whoever he wanted and for big bucks; with an exclamation point.

The gallant Mexican fighter will still have a great following. He will still get another big fight. But now there are far more question marks than exclamation points.

Sadly for Morales, he never had an answer in that Staples Center ring Saturday night. Sadly for Morales, they had no answers for him in his corner. He never looked good ... never really looked as if he were into this fight.

He was quiet, almost matter-of-fact when he talked to HBO's Larry Merchant after the fight.

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“He’s very elusive, very hard to fight,” Morales said about Raheem. “He never really put up a fight because he was moving around so much.”

Morales was not battered. His face was not a mess. He looked more like he had had a hard day in the gym. Still, he got hit. He got hit early and often and he got banged about for 12 rounds. (See judges scorecards).

“He hit me with a lot of punches,” Morales said. “But he also missed a lot and he also hit me on my arms. I was blocking a lot of them.”

Morales was banging through his first rounds at 135 pounds. But he said he did not think the weight was a factor. He just thought Raheem was “a difficult fighter.”

Quite honestly, no one in Morales’ camp — including Morales — knows exactly what to think at this moment.

They are just tasting the sadness.

\* \* \*

Zahir Raheem knows all about the sadness.

The Philadelphia fighter has never quite reached his boxing moment in the sun. He has seemed always in the shadows. He was a 1996 Olympian, but he lost in the third round while David Reid won the gold. He is 27-1 (giving 16 opponents early exits), but he lost a controversial decision to Rocky Juarez. He is 27-1, but he has never quite settled on the right weight ... never quite seemed to have the right amount of motivation; just too much sadness.

Saturday night at Staples, Raheem experienced the joy.

He fought beautifully. He left no doubt. No judge on the planet could have given that fight to anyone but Zahir Raheem.

And so when Michael Buffer read the verdict, he collapsed to the canvas — in joy.

Finally.

Later, he was every bit as quiet as Morales when talking to Merchant. Sometimes joy and sadness are so much, they seem almost the same.

“It was due ... it was due,” Raheem said. “It was my time. I’ve been in the game a long time. I stuck with it, stayed in the gym. I always believed in myself when nobody else would.”

Few people believed in Raheem when he made his entrance Saturday night, wearing cape and crown. He was given a limited amount of respect, considered worthy and somewhat of a remote danger to the plans for another Morales-Pacquiao party. But no one really expected him to beat

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Morales — except, perhaps, Raheem.

“It wasn’t a gift, man. I earned it.”

That he did.

He was complimentary of Morales: “He’s a great warrior but I believed in myself.”

And he was honest. When Merchant asked him if he was surprised it was so easy to land all that leather on Morales, he paused, then said, “Yes. I’m not going to be cocky. Yes I was.”

But he did. He landed repeatedly. He did not have the big bombs in those gloves to put Morales away. But, oh how he landed. He landed so much that now he has a future again. Top Rank will get him some money fights.

“I haven’t accomplished my professional goals,” he said. “I want to be a legend.”

Raheem has a long, long road to travel to reach that plateau. But he did take a step in the right direction on a September Saturday night in Los Angeles. And he fought his way to a sublime moment ... a moment of joy.

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Boxing and life are so similar, so intertwined it is almost eerie. We all know about sadness and joy. They are both fleeting.

Saturday night, Erik Morales owned the sadness.

As for that sadness, well, perhaps Morales just stepped through the ropes to find a fighter whose style is terribly, terribly wrong for “El Terrible.” Or perhaps he has simply stepped through the ropes too many times. He has had a grand ride in his career. Even though he just turned 29, he has had 51 fights over 13 years and so many of those fights have been long distance wars. And perhaps he has ventured too far north in weight class.

Only time will tell. Only time will tell us if it was one, two or all three of the above.

But for now, Morales is draped in the sadness that floated all around him for 12 rounds Saturday night.

Zahir Raheem owned the joy Saturday night.

Raheem might have made a major breakthrough in his career. Or he might have just captured lightning in a bottle at the Staples Center.

Again, time will tell. Time will tell if Raheem keeps his career spiraling upward and upward ... to better paydays, more respect and even more joy. Or ...

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Boxing and life are like that. Sadness and joy dip in, sail away, sometimes linger. Saturday night was one of those boxing moments — where the sadness and joy all came together in the same ring on the same evening.