

A Hero's Welcome, All in a Day's Work

Written by Phil Woolever

Friday, 25 November 2005 19:00

NOGALES, AZ— Just how far Julio Cesar Chavez will get involved in the promotional side of boxing is still undetermined. But for now, all he has to do is show up in these parts and the faithful will flock.

“I’m not sure how much I even want to do promoting,” Chavez said. “For now, most of what I do here is for my son (Julio Cesar Chavez Jr.) or the fans. We’ll see how it goes.”

Chavez was in this hospitable border region Saturday night as a figurehead for the “Azteca America Julio Cesar Chavez Presents” TV series. It was Chavez’s fourth appearance in such a role, a role that is still undefined.

At times it has appeared as if Chavez is calling at least some of the shots from behind the scenes. At others it looks like he’s simply along for the ride, providing considerable name and personal appearance value. Maybe it’s his version of the Donald Trump-type paid advertisement for himself.

Whatever the case, it’s solid box office, and in Nogales it was solid boxing. The schedule didn’t feature a marquee name, but the fighters did their jobs and the crowd responded. There were more empty beers around than usual, which is saying something in almost any pro boxing location.

An old-school crowd of well over a thousand braved chilly sunset air for a unique outside event on the grass of the Palo Duro Desert Creek Golf Course, just a few perfect tee shots from the border. It was reported locally that Nogales, Arizona, hasn’t hosted a pro card in 30 years, though a revitalized fight scene is less than an hour north.

There’s at least a tidbit of important pugilistic history around here however. Jack Johnson fought in sister city Nogales, across the Sonoran international line, winning a 15-round decision against Pat Lester in 1926.

Chavez was mobbed throughout the night with cell phone cameras and sincere embraces. The swarm multiplied until local police had to establish clearer breathing room. Chavez, sometimes testy under such circumstances, remained upbeat and worked the entire assembly well.

A beautiful starry night got chilled by the time fighters got into the ring. Tiki torches lit the perimeters along a lane to ringside, where dancing card girls escorted the fighters to battle. An elevated VIP patio on the converted links clubhouse looked like a travel commercial for Latin America.

In the main event, Jose Luis Zertuche, 166, continued his recently energized run at middleweight contention by steamrolling New Orleans native Ron Weaver, 168½, who came to fight but couldn’t get into gear.

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Zertuche's last appearance was in Phoenix, when he proved too much for touted hometown prospect Jesus Gonzales, on the undercard of Chavez's disappointing September debacle against Grover Wiley. Prior to that, Zertuche proved his rugged mettle with a draw against a peaking Fulgencio Zuniga.

Weaver, 29-17 (22), was wiped out by Hurricane Katrina and forced to evacuate. He now lives in Houston, and like thousands of other former residents of New Orleans, is trying to put his life back together. But business is business, and Zertuche, from Los Moches, Sinaloa, Mexico, is on the verge of a major encounter. Tonight, his stone was an easy step.

Some fighters need to warm-up by fight time. These guys had to keep moving lest icicles set in. Temperatures at fight time were in the mid to low forties. The crowd let tequila do its job.

Zertuche opened with straight shots to Weaver's body. Weaver waited to counter, then advanced behind left hooks. Zertuche looked vulnerable, but avoided any danger behind his own assault. He overpowered Weaver in the second round and backed him into a corner as they traded. A short hook splattered Weaver into the ropes and he got up on unsteady legs. As ref Bobby Ferrara checked Weaver's faculties, Weaver's corner wisely used its better judgment and got on the apron to end matters with 10 seconds left in the frame. It went into the books as a second-round TKO.

Zertuche, now 17-2 (14), spent more effort lunging over the ropes to give Chavez his props (and get some in return) than he did during the fight.

"I just have to keep active and I'll get some big fights," Zertuche said. "I never take anyone lightly, but I think I'm ready for the best."

Wayne Putnam opened the show with a bruising four-round decision over Nick Valentine. Putnam controlled most of the action, but Valentine was in the fight all the way. Putnam scored knockdowns in the second and fourth frames. Valentine lost a point for mauling infractions in the third. Both men weighed 147. Referee was Nico Perez.

Arturo Ortega, 164, took a disputed split-nod over Omar Pittman, 165, in a bruising eight-round bout. The stocky Ortega lunged in consistently, but Pittman conked him with counters more effectively. It wasn't the most technical display, but they never stopped heaving leather so the crowd was satisfied. Nico Perez was referee.

Oscar Montano quickly dumped frustrated Johnny Romero three times for an opening-round TKO. Both men weighed 170. Referee was Ray Scott.

Augustine Renteria, 160, outworked Benny Bara, 165, for a unanimous decision over six sloppy but entertaining sessions. The old warhorses showed plenty of heart and kept the crowd howling with a bloody walkout bout. Referee was Bobby Ferrara.

Chavez spent much of his time as a color commentator while sardine-canned fans waited patiently nearby. There were many questions about if and when he'd be fighting again, after his

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Adios tour spun out with a humble fifth-round surrender on his stool to late substitute Wiley.

Chavez still carried a bandaged right hand, the stated cause of his collapse. The wrapping's density was far less than when he was seen a couple weeks back. If rehabilitation goes well, he will probably fight again, just to erase the stain from the last loss. It looks like his legions are already over it.

"I just don't want my fighting career to end like that," Chavez said. "I want to fight one more time and feel like I used to in victory."

Upon many observations, the 43-year-old Chavez sometimes seems jaded and world-weary. Just as often, he flashes a smile that is truly carefree. His is the timeless contradiction of many an artist, and Chavez's canvas is usually adorned with a beer logo. But he speaks of farewell with untypical emotion.

How much, if and when, his right mallet will heal remains a question the old boy is tired of worrying about. In the meantime, while Chavez waits for a development that's out of his hands, he's still a presence in the game.

From the way it played on this crisp, invigorating evening it won't be another 30 years before the duke-outs return to old Nogie.

And it probably won't even be another 30 days before El Gran Campeon Chavez is back on hand somewhere out west, for the aficionados and for the market share, drawing the boxing crowd.