

Reclaiming Mike Anchondo

Written by Zachary Levin

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They write you off quickly in this game. Regardless of past achievements, you're only one bad outing from being dismissed as gutless, soft, unskilled, and overhyped. The sterling record you struggled to create is reevaluated. Press clippings hailing your arrival are retracted. If you're a handsome and glib golden boy, like "Mighty" Mike Anchondo, the scrutiny is worse.

Eight months ago he didn't just lose a match but personified the word meltdown when he faced Jorge Barrios. Not "hurt" so much as overwhelmed and disoriented, Anchondo was reduced to crawling around the canvas like a bewildered toddler, never making it out of the fourth frame.

Anchondo, who also lost his WBO super featherweight belt on the scales, fortified himself with excuses during the aftermath. His conditioning coach sabotaged his weight-loss strategy, he spent the previous day camping out in the sauna, his legs felt fried just making the ring walk. Predictably, the media and message board warriors savaged him. His once-impressive victories over "Goyo" Vargas and Julio Pablo Chacon meant zilch. His 25-0 (18 KOs) record must've been built on canvas-backs.

Regular civilians ebb and flow over a manageable four score if they're lucky. For fighters like Anchondo, who turned 23 shortly after the loss, a lifetime is stuffed into a few days. He says he had no comprehension of the depression that followed. But three weeks later, he appeared to be self-medicating on Häagan-Dazs and looked to be giving Marlon Brando a run for his money. The only thing lonelier than being down on all four in that ring must've been the months of self-examination that followed.

Last Friday, at the Bronx's Paradise Theater, Anchondo displayed some of the work he's put into himself.

Before we saw Anchondo under the lights, the choice of opponent augured his mental state. Antonio Ramirez is no soft touch, not the confidence booster you'd suspect. A rugged, come-forward brawler, he's the type to capitalize on what Barrios exposed. Matchmaker extraordinaire Johnny Bos said he would've never put Anchondo in with the dangerous Dominican (24-9-6, 17 KO's) his first fight back, and didn't rule out an upset knockout. Anchondo's promoter, Luis De Cubas, either has tremendous faith in him or wants to know immediately what he's got left.

When Anchondo disrobed, his midsection looked chunky but you could spread a picnic blanket over his broad, powerful back. Squat and short-waisted, he probably puts on weight just glancing at a Las Vegas buffet. He weighed in a hair under 136, and must've put 15 back on by fight time. If he could shave another five pounds off, get back down to the jr. lightweight limit without harming himself, he'd be that much more effective.

In the opening round he showed flashes of why Golden Boy Promotions once figured they'd ride his back to the top. On lambent legs, he darted around the flat-footed Ramirez. His left

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hand alone contained a gallery of jabs, uppercuts and hooks. Over rounds two and three, Anchondo occasionally stopped boxing and succumbed to whiplash-inducing exchanges. While his hand speed was superior, Anchondo tended to square up and raise his jaw in the air like he was shaving underneath it. (An old nasty habit of his.) Toward the end of the third, two hard wide hooks of Ramirez's—the only kind he throws—landed clean. Anchondo punished him in return, but left himself open in the process.

These were anxious moments because it's assumed Anchondo now has as many questions about himself as we do. It reminded me of the physical discomfort I felt watching Wladimir Klitschko against Sam Peter in September; the former's self-doubt or fragile structural integrity (could be either or both?) isn't just obvious but has been intelligently developed into a scaredy-cat, grab-and-hold blueprint. But this isn't how Anchondo fought. His willingness to hang inside and trade leather, when he should have been doing the opposite, suggests a healthy heart but a prohibitive need to overcompensate.

At the end of the fourth, Anchondo connected on a right hook behind Ramirez's ear that made his legs develop a mind of their own. To his credit, he swung right back and was most dangerous when hurt. The next round had great action, or maybe only appeared that way because Ramirez's corner applied so much water to his head. When he got hit, a dramatic spray burst from his hair like a school of flying fish. All we needed was some bluish cigar smoke and Charles Hoff would've risen from the dead.

Determined to play the spoiler, the undaunted opponent whacked Anchondo several times in the sixth, stalked him through out the seventh, and when "Mighty" Mike came out for the eighth, a long string of blood ran down his right eye. Had Floyd Mayweather been ringside, he'd have told the house fighter, "No easy work tonight."

Realizing this himself, Anchondo finally got down to work and dropped Ramirez with a straight right. Sensing the end, Ramirez summoned one final salvo in the ninth, rocking Anchondo badly with sweeping hooks. Breathing through an open mouth, the former titlist kept his composure and dropped Ramirez again. The challenger beat the count but had nothing left when he was assaulted once more. The referee halted the bout at 2:40 of the 9th round.

For a couple seconds Anchondo stared into space with a puzzling, blank expression. It didn't suggest triumph nor defeat but a beautiful weariness that said, "This is me...at last." One of his trainers, a 79-year old powerhouse named Leo Thalassites, hoisted the fighter onto his shoulders and walked him around the ring. Rejuvenated, Anchondo raised his arms, leaned his head back, and roared.

Undercard Highlights:

Lightweight Jorge Teron (9-0, 7 KOs) continues to impress. He ripped a game Celestino Rodriguez apart with digging left hooks to the body. A new fan of his, Roberto Duran, nodded in approval at the 20-year-old's ferocious body work. Taller than Diego Corrales with comparable punching power, Teron's shown that spark since he won his first of three NY Golden Gloves. Beyond his physical tools, it's Teron's mental maturity that makes you a believer.

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Eighteen-year-old Mexican jr. welterweight Julio Cesar Garcia is nicknamed "Baby Face," but looks older and more filled-out than Teron. Maybe that's because he just matured his record to 34-2 (27 KOs). NOT A MISPRINT! This youth is the one responsible for damaging Jose Luis Castillo's ribs before his rematch against Diego Corrales, and turned pro three days after turning 15. He KO'd Colombian Moises Alberto Pedroza (24-9-1, 21 KOs) with one blow as the bell sounded ending round two. This was only his third time fighting in the States, but file away his name. Soon you'll be speaking it often.