

## Fres Oquendo's Time For In-Ring Foes

Written by Michael Woods

Tuesday, 14 February 2006 19:00

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For two years, two long, boring, annoying, occasionally infuriating years, Fres Oquendo flicked on the TV, saw the best players in the heavyweight division on the screen, and said to himself: 'I can beat that dude. And I can beat the dude he's fighting.'

The 32-year-old Puerto Rican-born fighter came to this conclusion when he saw James Toney and John Ruiz doing battle in April 2005.

Ruiz was Oquendo's last foe, and even though Fast Fres came away with a loss (TKO11) on April 17, 2004, he still sees the Quietman as a completely beatable opponent. Because when Oquendo fought Ruiz at Madison Square Garden, his head wasn't right.

Oquendo's brother Henry, 31, who is now taking on a stronger role in advising his big bro, explained at a press conference to announce Oquendo's return bout on Lou DiBella's Broadway Boxing show at the Grand Ballroom in New York City Thursday night (tix 212-947-2577).

"Against Ruiz, that wasn't even him," the younger brother says. "They say money is the root of all evil, it's true. His mind wasn't right. Boxing is 80% mental."

Oquendo couldn't concentrate on the task at hand, he says, because the fighter was concerned that his manager at the time, Pepe Ramos, wasn't doing right by him.

Ramos had functioned as an advisor to Felix Trinidad Sr., and was essentially given Oquendo's contract by Don Felix. Ramos had a long history of dealing successfully with promoter Don King, who was functioning then as Oquendo's career-driver.

Oquendo didn't like the deals Ramos was hashing out for him, and said so. He said he wanted out from the deal with Ramos. Ramos said OK, but it's gonna cost ya.

How much, Oquendo asked.

More than a quarter million big ones, Ramos replied.

No effin way, Oquendo replied in turn.

So the two sides negotiated.

Slowly.

Back and forth it went.

And Oquendo sat. And sat.

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He didn't get fat during the hiatus, minimizing his worries with Budweiser and Dominos.

"I don't drink, I don't smoke," he says. "My health comes first."

His frustration at the waiting didn't manifest itself in slovenly habits. He ran 10Ks to keep his weight down. "I got my eight pack," he says, laughing.

Finally, the release from Ramos came through. Oquendo won't say how much it took to shoo Ramos away, because he signed a nondisclosure agreement.

Oquendo also cut ties with Don King about four months ago, which enabled him to pair up with DiBella. The two had become friendly when DiBella was head honcho at HBO, and Oquendo appeared versus David Izon on a Dec. 2001 HBO broadcast topped by Jameel McCline and Goofi Whittaker. "Me and Lou hit it off," Oquendo remembers. "It seemed like he was a guy for the fighters. DiBella promotes good young fighters. I saw what he did with Jermain Taylor. He'll do that with me."

If there was ever a time for a competent heavyweight boxer to keep himself out of promotional and managerial woes, it is now. From the period running from June 21, 2003 to today, if you are a heavyweight capable of punching a little bit, with a minimally sturdy chin, you are a player in the division.

When Lennox Lewis bid this sport adieu, he left behind a vacuum that has not to this day been filled. Vitali Klitschko auditioned for the part, but his body didn't cooperate. His brother tried out for the role, but his chin hasn't yet proved to meet those minimum standards of sturdiness. No one has stepped forward, with the boldness and bravura requisite of a true heavyweight heir apparent, and staked a claim for the Throne That Lennox Left Behind.

The first step back for Oquendo towards claiming the throne comes Thursday in New York City, when he sheds some rust against Brazilian Daniel Bispo (16-2). DiBella phrased it well when he said at the press conference that Bispo is not a guy who is used to losing. He's been brought in not to lay down, but to test Oquendo, give him a good scrap.

With a win in hand, Oquendo says he's ready for a step up in class, and by the end of this year, he says, he'll be back in the title mix.

During his copious downtime, he watched the best and brightest in the division, and it left him frustrated. "I watched Wladimir against Sam Peter, and I thought, 'I can beat both these guys.' I watched Barrett and Rahman, a boring fight."

Oquendo has had plenty of time to scout out future foes. One fighter Oquendo targets is James Toney, who's meeting Hasim Rahman on March 18.

He thinks Toney, properly motivated, can stand out in the current heavyweight scene. "If he comes in against Rahman at around 230, I like Toney. If he comes in around 250, it's going to be a hard night."

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Another boxer on Oquendo's To-Do list is Chris Byrd. The two met in Sept. 2003 and Oquendo came away with a loss. The fight for Byrd's IBF crown went the distance, and Byrd got the nod on all the cards. Many in attendance thought Oquendo outboxed Byrd.

"Chris Byrd knows I beat him," Oquendo says. "I'd like a rematch."

This go-round, Oquendo hopes, he won't be distracted by out-of-the-ring chicanery. He'll have his brother Henry, and another brother Hector Morales, an attorney, looking after his best interests with intensity.

The web of family has served the Oquendos well. Their mom, Arquelia Rodriguez, watched over the kids with x-ray eyes at the Lathrop projects in Chicago, a rough and tumble zone where success stories can turn into horror stories in the blink of an eye. Guns, drugs, gangs – it's all there for a curious teen, and Ms. Rodriguez made it her mission to keep the kids on the straight and narrow. That's why, if you have a rooting interest in seeing one of these heavyweights distance themselves from the pack, Oquendo emerges as one of the sentimental favorites. If he can get some traction, and get into the mix, his sweet demeanor and upbeat back-story makes for press-friendly subject matter.

And lest anyone think Oquendo is back for another go because he's frittered away his purses, brother Henry is here to set you straight: "Fres was 75% ready to call it quits when the management stuff was at its worst. But we invested very well in real estate in Chicago. We're not here for the money."

Really, there is no reason Oquendo has any less claim to the empty throne than anyone else. He can punch enough to keep anyone honest. He owns a jab that is more than pesky when he lets it go. His chin isn't made of Teflon, but neither is it so suspect that you cringe anytime anything is aimed at it. He lived in the projects in Puerto Rico before he came to the States in 1975. He lived in the projects in the Chicago when he got here. He hasn't succumbed to temptation, he's got a sweet smile that he shows freely and often, and also, he's got five kids to feed. The throne is still open. No reason why Fres' butt shouldn't be the one to keep it warm for a spell.

### *SPEEDBAG*

One of the busiest trainers in the biz, Buddy McGirt, has just added another body into the rotation. Lamon Brewster has been working with McGirt in Florida for the last three weeks. Brewster's been doing pad work and McGirt will have him sparring next week. McGirt loved Brewster's rabid pit-bull look when he steamrolled (TKO1) Andrew Golota in May 2001. "But," McGirt cautioned, "you can't jump on everybody."

McGirt also gave a thumbs up to Buddy Jr., who had an epiphany of sorts in training for his last fight (a Feb. 3 TKO3 win over Chris Overby in Detroit). "He was a little lackadaisical but I explained to him you can play basketball, you can play football, but you can't play boxing," the former welterweight champion said. "He's a tall southpaw super middleweight and I was a short orthodox welterweight, so sometimes he tries to emulate me. But he's better than I thought he

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would be. He's starting to grasp it." Junior fights again next week in Delaware.

Another standout in the McGirt stable is Joel Julio, the heralded Colombian welterweight, who's on the Mosley/Vargas Vegas undercard on Feb. 25. No opponent has been chosen yet. "He's an unbelievable talent," McGirt said. "He's only 21. But he's going to make a lot of noise at welterweight and junior middleweight."

Is there anyone that Julio reminds you of at this point, Buddy?

"He has his own style," the trainer said. "He's very unique. But as far as some stuff he does that he can get away with that other guys can't, I'd say Aaron Pryor."