Of the many big fights lined up in what so far has been a banner year for professional boxing, Shane Mosley against Fernando Vargas at Mandalay Bay in Las Vegas tonight is perhaps the biggest attraction of the blossoming bunch.

While Vargas versus Mosley will be one of those events that brings out the beautiful people, there isn't any certainty that these enduring entertainers will combine styles and shots in a spectacular manner. In fact, it's just as likely the boys will put on a skillful but anti-climactic clinic on how not to lose.

Then again, it could very well be one of the best beat-downs Vegas has seen in over a month. That would be maintaining quite a standard, considering Manny Pacquiao – Erik Morales II happened just up the street a few weeks ago.

While a level of sustained fury equal to that 130 pound epic is unlikely, if junior middleweights Mosley, 41-4 (35), and Vargas, 26-2 (22), throw with abandon, the result could be even more dramatic, considering the star power involved.

Everything about the promotion has been first-class up to this point, in another showcase in which both men behaved like gentlemen.

"I've always had total respect for Fernando," said Mosley. "I've watched him throughout his career and I've admired his heart and his courage. He never gives up and he always gives 100%. That's why I believe its going to be a great fight."

"I'm really excited about this fight," echoed Vargas. "Shane Mosley is a great fighter. I respect Shane. I like Shane. Every time I've seen him it's been nothing but love. But come the twenty-fifth, there's no friends in this game."

Now, if the gentlemen will just pound the crap out of each other, almost everybody watching will really be happy. But don't count on that big leather-swapping scenario. The odds of one guy coming out way ahead are substantial, but this pairing doesn't look anything like the type that unfolds as a give-and-take war of attrition.

At this point all our totally fallible signs point to Mosley winning by a comfortable margin. Style-wise, the 34-year-old Mosley seems to have more of his basic strengths intact.

By the time we get to Vegas, the Fates will be whispering for the naturally bigger Vargas by knockout, loud.

This is one of those fights, ala James Toney – Evander Holyfield, that figures to point to an obvious winner, but only once they've come to the scratch line. Weigh-ins don't always offer the clearest clues. Every once in a while, it all becomes conking crystal clear during the walk into

the arena. Some last second wagers made after watching fighters enter the ring have benefited from that intangible vibe. Such scenes are what the pinnacle is all about.

The principles are certainly both fan favorites. Either could still possess enough skill to up the ante in categories of both Fight and Fighter of the Year for 2006.

Personal observation of each highly likeable contestant make this one of those matchups that one can't wait to see, but where you hate to see either guy lose. We got no problem with classic draws in a case like this.

In the trivia department, it's probably the biggest fight in which the co-stars have each fought the promoter. Looking at Oscar De La Hoya as the common denominator, one would have to pick Mosley to win, but this fight is nowhere near that simple. That's not to say it couldn't be.

Mosley's statements regarding Vargas being unprepared for Mosley's strength rang logical, confident, and true. If they wrestle inside, the 28-year-old Vargas's back could give out, or get wrenched in some new direction.

Mosley fought very well against widely recognized pound-for-pound lobbyist Winky Wright for 24 rounds not too long ago, in 2004. Excepting Wright's early missteps, maybe the only person to perform better against his prime form is Vargas, but that was during the last millennium.

Recently, in two times out over the past year, after around eighteen months away due to back related problems and other general ailments, Vargas has worked his way up from Ray Joval in March '05 to Javier Castillejo in August.

Mosley's pair of '05 wins, against Jose Luis Cruz and David Estrada, are not as meaningful.

Vargas may have been roundly criticized after his lackluster victories, but along the way he also got in 20 rounds of quality icebreaking. Vargas comes into this fight fully aware that his fistic legacy is on the line. As March Madness approaches, we may see a little Ferocious lunacy at just the right time, like a perfectly peaking NCAA tournament Cinderella.

For that matter, Mosley too has both big future career earnings and a long-term legacy at stake. If it's just business as usual to Shane, Vargas may take care of it for him.

Some prominent observers have voiced opinions that this is one of those affairs that arrive too late. No doubt it might have been a better brawl in 2002, but then again, if the boys have indeed slowed down considerably, it could make for more give and take. Each man may get far more opportunities, but he may also be more wide open. Aging bulls die the hardest.

Vargas has reportedly had injuries since he broke his hand just prior to his scheduled pro debut in November of '96. Most recently, chronic back and related problems kept him from training and cashing in further on his popularity. The point is, he's dealt with it.

Handicapping this bout involves as much tit for tat as comparisons between the various casino

hostesses at each VIP section.

Each man had an outstanding amateur career. Pedigree is equal.

Vargas took his first noteworthy title from Yory Boy Campas in December of ’98. In a relative power rating that includes hindsight, Campas comes out stronger than Philip Holiday, Mosley’s first big mark in August of 1997.

Since then, each man has had comparable ups and downs. In our book, mileage is equal. Mosley has more left in the tank. Vargas can easily run him off the road. So it goes, until the first bell.

Here’s the closest we can come to breaking it down: The chance of Mosley winning by unanimous decision is fifty percent. The chance of Vargas winning by mid-rounds TKO is forty percent. The chance of just about anything else happening between them this side of a broke-back mountain is ten percent.

“I was in camp with Mr. Mosley for his rematch with De La Hoya,” said Vargas’ trainer Danny Smith. “He trains very, very hard. But Fernando is prepared.”

“I look forward to showing a new offense come this fight,” promises Vargas. “I don’t think he’s as fast as he was before. In my last fight I had to lose forty pounds in eleven weeks, and four pounds the day of the weigh in. I went into the sauna for an hour and had to be carried to my room. So I was shot in the first round. Now my knowledge about conditioning and what to eat is way better.”

“I can’t wait and I know he can’t,” smiled Mosley, “It’s a California thing now. He’s just not gonna go away. I’m in great shape because I know it’s going to be a hard fight. I know I’m ready. He better be ready.”

By the time the clock strikes midnight this weekend at Mandalay Bay, we’ll know whom the ringside bell tolled for. After this engagement, word of what happened will not stay in Vegas.

Mosley. Vargas.

All right.