

Casamayor puts lightweight division on notice

Written by Robert Cassidy Jr.
Wednesday, 01 March 2006 19:00

Hollywood, FL – There may not be many places in America right now where the mention of Guantanamo will produce cheers. To those on the left of the political spectrum, it symbolizes the blind, unjust brutality of President Bush's war on terror. To those on the right, it is a grim reminder of why the war on terror began.

Here at the Hard Rock Hotel and Casino on February 24, Joel Casamayor was introduced to the assembled fight crowd as hailing originally from Guantanamo, Cuba. A wild, giddy applause followed as a Cuban flag fluttered inside the ring.

Casamayor was raised just across from the barbed wire and gun towers of the U.S. Naval base in Guantanamo Bay. The only thing the world hears about Gitmo these days is that enemy combatants – alleged terrorists – are detained there and their treatment, so to speak, is sub-human. Or, sub-par, depending on the party lines you follow.

But on this night, that world seems miles away. Casamayor is back in the ring after an eight-month absence. He is focused and prepared and enthusiastic. On a large screen at one end of the arena, the promoters show a video clip from a recent press conference. First is Antonio Ramirez, the opponent from the Dominican Republic. Speaking through an interpreter, he says, "I am the rooster and Casamayor is the chicken. He will do a lot of running."

The crowd boos. The casino is about 30 minutes from Calle Ocho – 8th Street – and the Little Havana neighborhood where Casamayor remains a hero.

Then it is Casamayor's turn. Speaking through promoter Luis DeCubas, he says, "I will do my talking in the ring. We'll see."

What we saw was vintage Casamayor.

Casamayor opened the fight aggressively, yet composed. Ramirez, who went nine tough rounds with Mike Anchondo in his previous contest, came to fight. The majority of his losses have come against quality opponents such as Michael Clark and Angel Manfredy. No one told him he was the opponent tonight. The Cuban southpaw moved forward behind a stiff right jab as Ramirez attempted to find his range. Hitting Casamayor has never been easy. And on this night he's hard to hit and he doesn't have to run. He has the kind of balance that is reminiscent of fellow southpaw Hector Camacho in his prime. (Unfortunately, Camacho, 43, was in attendance here to hype his March 24 comeback fight against Keith Sims.)

The chants of "Cepillo, Cepillo" – which he translates either into butterfly or the broom, depending on who you are listening to – begin in Round 1 and last throughout the fight. Casamayor, 34, is using his entire repertoire. His punches are crisp and his left uppercut can't miss Ramirez. The Cuban continually peppers Ramirez and then deftly steps to the side to avoid and return fire.

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Then it happens in Round 3. Ramirez lands a stiff right hand flush on Casamayor's chin. The opponent makes his statement and presses the action. He's here to win and now Casamayor is here to survive. He does, he escapes the round without further damage.

The fourth session opens quickly with Ramirez hoping to maintain the momentum and capture Casamayor's heart. But Cepillo is not having it. The pace accelerates and Casamayor's combination-punching quickly shift the momentum back to his favor.

Order is restored and the chants of "Cepillo, Cepillo" begin once again.

Now it's time for Cepillo's statement. It comes midway through Round 5. It comes in the form of a straight left hand. It lands on the button and Ramirez goes down. It's over. Ramirez is counted out at 0:26 of the round. Don't dismiss Casamayor's punching ability so quickly. He improved his record to 32-3-1 with 20 knockouts while Ramirez dropped to 24-11-6 and 17 stoppages.

The story of Casamayor is well documented. He outpointed Wayne McCullough at the 1992 Olympics to win a gold medal. His reward from Fidel Castro's government? A bicycle. He sold the bike and bought a pig so he could feed his family. While other Cuban athletes were lavished with expensive gifts and privileges, Casamayor took this as an affront. Then, one the eve of the 1996 games, he defected from Cuba's training camp in Guadalajara, Mexico.

The story of his career in the United States is also well documented. He is the most successful of the Cuban defectors – save Juan Carlos Gomez, who fights mostly in Europe. He captured the WBA super featherweight title in 1999 and later lost a close unification bout with Acelino Freitas. He's split a pair of bouts with Diego Corrales and lost a decision to Jose Luis Castillo.

Casamayor, ranked in the top 10 by the WBA, IBF and WBO, is hoping to make an even bigger impact at lightweight. He is no longer with trainer Buddy McGirt, instead, working with Ricky Diaz and he has shifted his training headquarters out of Florida to Phoenix.

The plan right now is to maneuver Casamayor into a title fight against unbeaten WBA champion Juan Diaz. But the classy Cuban has called out all the elite fighters in the division – Corrales, Castillo, Chavez, and even asserted a willingness to face Marco Antonio Barrera if he moves up in weight.

Casamayor has become somewhat of an enigma the last few years. While he is rarely your typical southpaw who engages in dull, counter-punching affairs, he is a typical southpaw in that his fights can be difficult to score. His losses to Corrales and Castillo were via split decision and some think he did enough to beat Freitas. But there is also a sentiment that Casamayor has been unable to win convincingly, that he somehow does just enough to win. In a close fight, that's not always enough.

Today, Casamayor seems rejuvenated. In the Cuban community, he has solidified his status as a champion. In the boxing community, he has solidified his status as a fighter who ducks no one. That combination should make for an interesting future in the lightweight division.