

## Trash Talk Round 1: Less jabber, more jabbing

Written by Jesse K. Cox

Wednesday, 29 March 2006 19:00

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*Author's note: This is the first in a two-part series that will discuss the pros and cons of trash talk in boxing.*

It's becoming rather formulaic. Shouting. Insults. Threats. Innuendo. Glaring. Pushing, and sometimes punching. These are the ingredients of boxing's modern press conference, and we've all inadvertently bought the ticket to come along for the ride. For better or worse.

America loves a loudmouth. If that weren't the case, the success of super promoter Don King and political television pundit and super goober Bill O'Reilly would be inexplicable. King has one up on O'Reilly because his hair is pretty loud, too.

Being that I'm 27-years-old, the time of a press conference being called for the simple reason of announcing a fight isn't something I've ever known. My generation wallowed in the Hollywood intrigue of a venomous portrayal of the "Rocky III" character Clubber Lang by Mr. T. We sopped that up with a big, flamboyant biscuit called the World Wrestling Federation, which was a regular event Saturday nights during the 1980s.

I've grown up since then, although others are still watching World Wrestling Entertainment on cable. The worst thing about Vince McMahon's sweaty drama crammed into Lycra was that too much talk ended weeks later when opposing sides joined forces for a tag team match.

Completely bogus. My mother had to break the heart of an 8-year-old when he asked questions about it. Hulk Hogan died alongside Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy.

I nearly fell for wrestling routine earlier this month. The Associated Press released a story on the Oscar De La Hoya-Ricardo Mayorga press tour. It was a twisted little promotion put on by Don King that resembled a traveling sideshow from the first day. Mayorga, of course, was the gasp-inspiring abomination from which nobody would peel their eyes. The Bearded Lady and Lobster Boy wrapped up in one package.

"I know you all love Oscar De La Hoya," he said in Chicago. "I love him, too. That is why I am going to bring him to you all in a body bag."

He made mention of detaching retinas, and I probably missed something about Mayorga promising to defile a various members of De La Hoya's family. The other descriptive threats did catch my attention.

"Did you see this Mayorga-De La Hoya story on the AP," I asked a colleague.

"You know," he said, "they're just going to end up hugging afterward."

Thank the Lord for the smelling salts of reality.

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I'd fallen into the trap momentarily. It's the pit of pointed sticks tipped with the venom of the verbose, though not incredibly agile, trash talkers.

Most will trace the beginning of the trash talk phenomenon to Muhammad Ali. He peppered his opponents with his mouth before he ever laid a glove on them. ESPN2 analyst Teddy Atlas and boxing historian Bert Sugar agreed that Ali's pre-fight rants were more palatable than anything since his departure.

"Today, the fighters who are doing it, it's not always substantial enough where you want to pay attention," Atlas said. "You don't want to hear it. You don't want to permit it the way you didn't mind permitting it with a guy like Ali; a guy who delivered.

"His was creative. There was time spent doing it. He came up with some direction to it. Something worth listening to."

Sugar said obnoxious chatter is more societal than it is a sole property of the fight game.

"If you listen to any rap song – of course I have no choice, it's that goddamn loud," Sugar said. "If you listen to lyrics, they're 'dissing' everybody."

The De La Hoya-Mayorga card is one King hopes will yield a huge pay-per-view draw, about two million shares. It's a wonder that Mayorga didn't wrap up the tour by tossing lit cherry bombs in De La Hoya's lap.

Uncle Don needs some big numbers, so raise hell, Ricardo.

Mayorga does have a shelf life with his skill set aimed at the short term, as opposed to De La Hoya's textbook style. But the fight would stand on its own with two very recognizable names in the main event. Not to mention it's possibly the final fight of De La Hoya's storied career if things go horribly wrong for him May 6.

Boxing sold itself in the previous century, Atlas said, and no harsh verbal exchanges between parties mattered.

"The fighting was enough to sell the sport," he said. "There were clubs all over the place, and 40,000, 50,000 people would fill Yankee Stadium. They didn't have to create an adlib thing. They were good fights.

"I just like a good fight."

Sugar didn't accept boxing's generally diminished skill level is wrapped and sold by poor fighter's musing about an opponent.

"It's a psychological ploy," Sugar said. "If Mayorga gets under the skin of De La Hoya, then it will pay off.

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“They’re not pushing a bad product. They’re pushing themselves.”

Bad product or not, sometimes the press conference formula is too much for a boxing scribe. It leaves the seasoned writers such as Sugar scrambling.

“I’ve heard it all before,” he said. “Where’s the bar?”

I’ll leave my recorder on the podium. Wait for me, Bert.