

If He's Chicken, He's Cordon Bleu (That's Blue Ribbon for You Non-French Speakers)

Written by Michael Katz
Thursday, 04 May 2006 19:00

LAS VEGAS, May 5 – He was talking about retiring again, that this could be his final fight, and I felt stabs of regret. We've had some personal history; I was the one who dubbed him "Chicken de la Hoya." His people had me kicked out of a couple of press interviews. All in all, though, I had much respect for him. No, he was not the greatest fighter in the world, but the "Chicken" long ago crossed the road to hall of fame recognition.

And as he talked about maybe winning a world title tomorrow night would be a nice way to end it, a collage of memories hit me. James (Buster) Douglas had just sneaked the heavyweight championship out of Tokyo past Don King and Jose Sulaiman and was making an appearance for Steve Wynn at the new Mirage when I saw this 17-year-old kid for the first time. I had already heard of Oscar de la Hoya, knew that he spelled his name lower case d and l and possessed a ferocious left hook to the body.

It was the 1990 Goodwill Games trials and de la Hoya was everything I had heard and more, in fact, the second best young fighter I had ever seen. He turned out a lot better than Tony Ayala Jr., who last I heard was picking watermelons for the state of Texas in a prison outside Abilene. De la Hoya had leading man looks, terrific speed and that hook to the body. It took years and years to discover he also had a superior chin, ring smarts and fierce pride.

He might have been able to give Sugar Ray Leonard or Thomas Hearns a fight.

He won the Goodwill Games at 123 pounds, took an Olympic gold medal at 132 in Barcelona two years later and was dubbed the "Golden Boy" and that was no lie. I read some place he has made over \$200 million in boxing purses, not bad for a son of illegal immigrants. That's not counting a Grammy-nominated CD. He won titles at 130, 135, 140, 147, 154 and 160 pounds as a pro. He is going after another version of the junior middleweight championship tomorrow night when he challenges Ricardo Mayorga, the unhappy Nicaraguan, at the MGM Grand and for \$50 you can see him on pay-per-view and suddenly he is talking again about the possibility this could be his farewell fight.

It's hard to read de la Hoya. He plays defense in interviews as well as anyone, setting up high walls and moats. He used to talk about retiring by age 25, then 30 and here he is at 33 without having fought in almost 20 months. The last time we saw him in the ring, he was on all fours, punching the canvas instead of trying to get up from a Bernard Hopkins body shot.

In terms of class, there should be no doubt as to the victor tomorrow night, which is why de la Hoya has been the 3-1 favorite. The original game plan was to fight around the Cinco de Mayo holiday now, then have a big "farewell" fight Sept. 16 to celebrate Mexican independence. Now here he was saying that the reason he came back was because he had to erase the image of his crawling around on the canvas. Sure, as if everyone remembers Muhammad Ali for his last two hapless appearances, against Larry Holmes and Trevor Berbick, or Sugar Ray Leonard being knocked out by Hector Camacho.

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But now he was talking that maybe beating Mayorga, winning a title (which ain't what it used to be), would be a nice way to leave, that it would "erase" those nights when "I can picture myself on the canvas with Hopkins, almost every night."

He said "it can't happen again." Mayorga hits hard, but he's certainly not as dangerous as the two men who have been most mentioned for a September fight, Winky Wright or Floyd Mayweather Jr. By then, Wright could be the middleweight champion of the world (hardly a sure thing when he meets Jermain Taylor next month).

He said "ninety-five percent of them stayed in this business too long and I don't want to be like one of them."

He said the game was "dangerous." He said, "Come May 7, I'm going to have to do a lot of thinking."

He's made the business his business. Golden Boy Promotions is a major player, a natural rival of Bob Arum and Don King. He's got more than 40 years on the old promoters. He's got friends at HBO, ESPN and Telefutera. Hell, he's got friends anywhere he wants. He's the Golden Boy with the Midas touch.

I'm sure he'll give me opportunity to criticize him again. That goes with the territory. Much of my Chicken-based humor was aimed at his promoter, Bob Arum. After de la Hoya squeaked by Pernell Whitaker – I was among the minority who thought Oscar was beaten – when asked about a rematch, Arum snapped, "Who needs it?" In other words, it was okay to give Julio Cesar Chavez, a faded pathetic version of the former star, another chance at taking a beating, but Arum wasn't going to risk the boy who laid the golden eggs a second time against Whitaker.

Immediately after the fight, de la Hoya said he would be glad to give Whitaker another go. But that was another reason I called him "Chicken." He didn't stand up to Arum on the matter. In fact, he didn't stand up to a lot of people, going back to his father.

He avoided confrontations. He fired trainer after trainer without even telling them. He dismissed managers the same way. Robert Mittleman and Steve Nelson, his original pro managers (having been subsidized by Arum to make sure Shelly Finkel didn't get to the kid whose mother he buried), got a note under the door. Phone calls were never returned so, in order to finish off some business, they drove out to Oscar's home. They saw him, but he saw them and quickly drove off.

Jesus Rivero, maybe the best trainer he ever had, used to walk around the gym with a broom in his hand so that Robert Alcazar, the guy who was with him in the amateurs, wouldn't get wise to the fact that there was a more important voice in de la Hoya's ear. Emanuel Steward came and went. Gil Clancy to this day hasn't been notified that he's been dismissed.

Nobody's perfect. At the same time that he refused to be man enough to take the responsibility himself to fire someone, he has held on to some of his oldest ties, going back to kindergarten friendships.

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There were fights, too, where Oscar wasn't exactly the bravest. The way he ran from Felix Trinidad Jr. over the last four rounds – four, not three – should have resulted in points deducted and/or a disqualification. I don't blame him. Trinidad was about to come on so de la Hoya decided discretion was the sincerest form of flattery. Funny, during all the prefight hype, Trinidad and his promoter, Don King, imitated my heckles of "Chicken de la Hoya." The island of Puerto Rico was plastered with Pollo signs. Even now, Ricardo Mayorga says he sparred with live chickens to prepare himself for Chicken de la Hoya.

After Whitaker, Arum gave de la Hoya one setup after another. David Kamau, the faded Hector Camacho, Wilfredo Rivera, Patrick Charpentier, the rematch with Chavez followed in undistinguished order. But the Chicken de la Hoya chants were heard in his own neighborhood.

Oscar was no Chicken. He finally told Arum to make some real matches. Okay, I thought maybe Ike Quartey held on to beat him. It was a close fight and de la Hoya showed cujones. He went up against Trinidad, tried Sugar Shane Mosley. He got his last great victory over Fernando Vargas.

An all-time great? Not for what he did in the ring. For all his growing up the scale, I believe Oscar's prime was at welterweight. He would have been good opposition, but I doubt if he would have beaten Jose Napoles or Emile Griffith. He and Roberto Duran would have been a terrific matchup. At lightweight, you have to like Duran; at 147 pounds, de la Hoya is much closer.

But what makes de la Hoya special is by no means limited to his boxing. He was always a one-armed fighter – his left hand is his strong hand; he doesn't have much of a right, though Floyd Mayweather Sr. has gotten him to throw it more. But in the counting houses is where he was truly Golden.

He was brilliantly brought up by Arum. It was the promoter's job to protect him; it is mine to try and protect the public from de la Hoya-Charpentier mismatches. But he was smart enough to leave Arum. Twice. He has signed such stars as Hopkins and Mosley – if you can't beat them, hire them – and Marco Antonio Barrera.

He is the poster child for all immigrants, legal or "illegal." He knows this is an immigrant society and he has captured the American dream as no Hispanic-American before him, even Carmen Miranda or Desi Arnaz.

He has invested in the Hispanic community, building banks and hospitals. It takes a tough Chicken to make tender citizens. He is properly celebrated way beyond the ropes. Even as a boxing promoter, he brings something new to the business. The game has long suffered because few corporate suits want to be identified with it. Tomorrow night's fight has three sponsors new to boxing – Baccardi rum, Coca-Cola and Southwest Airlines – who do not mind being associated with the Golden Boy. Few boxers of his stature can hold the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval.

Part of me hopes he retires if he beats Mayorga. I don't see him gaining any Brownie points by

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trying Winky Wright or Floyd Mayweather Jr. in September. At this stage (age), he can't beat either. But if he doesn't fight them, I will not call him a Chicken, at least not until Chicken is a sign of great respect. This Chicken has come first far too often to be mistaken for a yegg.

I won't miss him that much as a fighter, and besides, he'll be around for as long as he wants, or as long as boxing is permitted by civilization.

PENTHOUSE: Hasim Rahman, who would have been at tonight's alternate dinner to the Boxing Writers Association annual affair, but is off on a pilgrimage to Mecca. He'll be back in time for next week's New York press conference to announce his Aug. 12 fight here against Oleg Maskaev.

OUTHOUSE: I was going to put Ricardo Mayorga in here for caving in and agreeing to accept whatever he signed for, but then he started making disparaging remarks about Don King, his promoter, so I decided to keep the W.C. unoccupied. Okay, let's put in all the alphabets, just for old times sake. I don't want to get into the reasons why I quit the Boxing Writers (a joke) and why Kevin Iole quit and why there may be a few other scribes at the alternative dinner tonight. Somewhere, my old rabbi, Barney Nagler, must be spinning.

MORE DIS AND THAT: There's a possibility of a one-day eight-man heavyweight tournament in July in Australia, where money must grow in the Outback. The idea is four rounds for each bout, the first flight worth at least \$100,000 going on up to the winner receiving \$5 million. I was told this by John Hornewer, attorney for Chris Byrd, who says Byrd might join such invitees as Samuel Peter, Shannon Briggs, Michael Grant, Ruslan Chagaev, even that great Jewish nebbish, Roman Greenburg....My thought: Why would anyone put up so much money for Byrd? I mean, how can he lose a four-round decision as long as he doesn't fight the way he did against Wladimir Klitschko last month....What bugs Hornewer, incidentally, is that Papa Joe Byrd had anticipated Klitschko's ploy of sticking out the left arm and had worked on defending that maneuver – knocking the hand away, punching the elbow, but Chris fought, as he would say, "knuckleheaded."...There's a Showtime card tonight in case you don't want to pay \$50 to see if Ricardo Mayorga shows up on time, but I think the MGM prelim between Joan Guzman and Javier Jauregui, plus a chance to watch Kassim Ouma, more than makes up for missing Alejandro Garcia and Jose Antonio Rivera....The pay-per-view card opens with a four-rounder with Jorge Paez Jr. His dad is here, looking as wild as ever, and talk about how time flies – in his 14th pro fight, 12 years ago, de la Hoya knocked out Jorge Paez Sr. in the second round to win the WBO lightweight title. Now he is co-promoting Paez's son, an 8-0 lightweight with five knockouts....Mayorga says he's hated de la Hoya ever since Oscar bloodied his idol, Julio Cesar Chavez. I've got a feeling he's going to have a more personal reason for hating de la Hoya after tomorrow night.