

“Are You Making Any Money?”

Written by Joe Rein
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Walk around with something valuable -- look like a mark; they'll come outta the woodwork to take it from you.

That's Daniel Ponce De Leon, WBO 122-pound Champion. Mention his name at the Wild Card gym, Who? is the response. ...lots of blank looks and damning with faint praise. He's no gym phenom -- more Maussa than Mayweather. A day player, not a star.

He's a clenched fist, sparring -- an impatient 5'5" southpaw -- he brings it! -- with little give in his legs -- over-wide stance --- and constant I-want-to-kill-you lead lefts, making his handlers cringe. But he shrinks from no exchange -- head down, squared-up, furiously winging to knock down a building. None of it by design, more a random act of violence.

Many of his free swings are blocked or parried, but when his sparmate steps back, thinking he's out of range, Ponce brings new meaning 'to reach out and touch someone,' with a wingspan just shy of Marciano's. The shudder when he lands makes clear why he's dangerous.

Just outside the ropes, Israel Vazquez, the WBC Super Bantam king, ticks a jump rope like a metronome, no matter how heated the action. Ponce doesn't figure on his radar.

Exiting the ring, Ponce looks like someone walking the wrong way at a white-sale. The Red Sea parts when Pacquiao and Toney come through.

Seeing his unmarked face as he pulls off his head guard forces reappraisal: He's not taking the punishment that meets the eye. The 25-year-old's been fighting since the gloves were bigger than he was.

Ponce defends his title -- sans TV coverage -- against Alejandro Barrera (18-0, 12 KOs) -- cousin of Marco Antonio -- on Saturday, May 27 at Home Depot Center on the undercard of Fernando Montiel vs. Jhonny Gonzalez on HBO's Boxing After Dark. Ponce's the little man that isn't there, the "I get no respect!" poster boy.

With fight fans, it's all about: what've you done for me lately? When Hatton annihilated Tszyu, he was the greatest thing since sliced bread. Now he's Ricky who?

Ponce was thumped last year in a 12-round loss to Celestino Caballero in an IBF Jr. feather eliminator. He couldn't solve the almost-six-foot lefty-turned-orthodox. Even though he's re-tooled, with three straight W's -- the last one for the WBO crown against a really big name: Sodlooknongyangtoy, of Thailand, the powers-that-be haven't forgiven him. He's been sent off to Coventry.

Golden Boy promotes his next three fights, but you'd never know it by the lack of response to discuss him...and Joel De La Hoya's his manager. So Ponce hard-hats-it to feed his wife and

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three kids. His title and \$1.25 gets him on a bus.

Ponce's TV snub is a sore spot with trainer/advisor Joe Hernandez, brother of Ray Torres, the HBO Spanish translator. “He's not pretty, Hernandez demurs, “but he's 27 and 1, with 25 knockouts... he's a world champion, for God sake. He deserves respect!”

‘Attention must finally be paid this man’

Hernandez, a caffeinated, 60ish multi-tasker, has his priorities straight. He's taken his lumps -- been around the game for 30 years. Both brothers were pros, scouted fighters, and learned from Cus D'Amato at the old Gramercy gym in New York. He doesn't sugarcoat it. He's as direct as a punch in the face.

“He took a beating...a beating!” Hernandez says of Ponce's loss to Celestino. After he was dropped, he woke up. We re-grouped. But he's only at it for three months. Whether it will show in his up-coming fight, only the Good Lord knows.

“He's gonna have to execute. It's not: We must show. If we don't show improvement, I haven't done my job...the fighter's not gonna get called in by HBO. Therefore, he's not gonna make any money. You're in there to make money. That's what boxing's all about.

A world title. Glory...The main objective is: Are you making any money?

After 119 amateur fights, a Mexican Olympian, 28 as a pro -- a world champion—Ponce has nothing to show for it. Creditors don't take clippings.

There's more than one way to take a bite out of the apple: “Our goal, says Hernandez, “is to win three more fights, then our contract with Golden Boy will expire. We want to freelance. We want no commitment with a promoter. We want to grab a piece of anyone out there.

“Because we are not known to have ability; we're not known as a good fighter...We might be known as a strong fighter. But anybody that sees Ponce will pick him first so they can take that title. Do I feel he can make a good amount of money? Oh, yeah, because we're not that good.

They have a name for that in the poolroom.