

Israel Vazquez gets spotlight again

Written by Ralph Gonzalez

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Mexico City's Israel "Magnifico" Vazquez (39-3, 28 KO's) wasn't supposed to be where he is. He's the WBC Super Bantamweight champion and is slated to appear on his second consecutive Pay-Per-View headlined by Bernard Hopkins and Antonio Tarver this Saturday in Atlantic City. Not bad for a guy that wasn't supposed to go that far according to some "experts" that evaluated the up and coming fighter in 1998 for manager Frank Espinoza.

He's also come a long way since he fought in front of less than 500 fans and no television signal.

I remember the evening well. It was three days after Christmas of 2004 and Vazquez was defending his IBF title for the first time against Art Simonyan at the Sycuan Casino which is east of San Diego, close to where the Southern California boondocks begin. Vazquez had lifted the title almost a year earlier via knockout from Jose Luis Valbuena in Los Angeles. He has since been stripped of the IBF belt.

It was trafficky and raining hard that night and I was experiencing a cold and fever but I felt like I had to be there. I've been covering Vazquez since before he got his first title shot against Oscar Larios in 2002. He lost by twelfth round stoppage in an ESPN2 classic blood and guts thriller.

He got revenge and Larios' belt this year on the undercard of the Hopkins-Taylor II pay-per-view.

"Beating a guy who was considered a pound-for-pound best like Oscar Larios really made people take notice," said Vazquez from his residence in Los Angeles. Vazquez pulled off a genuine upset by stopping Larios in the third round which garnered him the WBC belt.

Before beating Larios, Vazquez was promoted solely by Sycuan Ringside Promotions who had lured Vazquez away from Golden Boy Promotions. In an ironic twist of fate, Sycuan and De La Hoya's company have now partnered up to promote Vazquez in what the champion himself feels is a partnership that works. "Golden Boy has a lot of name recognition among the networks like HBO and Telefutera. They also have a lot of other fighters in their stable that I can match up against if everything goes well against Ivan Hernandez this Saturday," he said. "I'm a Sycuan fighter one hundred percent. I feel like they made the right move in putting together this partnership which I think will only result in bigger fights and more television exposure."

Ensenada, Mexico's Ivan "Choko" Hernandez (23-1-1, 13 KO's) will be his rival for the evening and Vazquez knows that no one can be underestimated. "Hernandez is the type of guy who will lay it all on the line. Those are the type of fighters you have to be the most careful with. He's only had one loss. He was a former world champion and wants to make his name by beating me. I'm conscious of these things and that's why I've trained so hard for this bout. As always, you will see me at my best," said Vazquez.

Vazquez, who is as likeable a fighter as you will ever meet, is a killer in the ring. His

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combinations are usually meant to end matters early like he did against Simonyan and Larios in their first and third meeting. A lot of fighters have brilliant skills but if they lack the killer instinct then they aren't truly complete as pugilists. Fortunately for Vazquez he's spent a lot of time sparring with one of the most vicious killers in the sport in Filipino icon Manny "Pac-Man" Pacquiao. "Sparring with Manny has taught me a lot. I do pretty well in the ring against him and we learn from each other. He's a good guy and I have a lot of respect for him."

Pacquiao will be facing Vazquez's former nemesis Larios on July second in the Philippines. If anyone has an insight to the upcoming clash it's Vazquez. "This will be a great fight. Manny's advantage is his incredible hand speed. I don't think Larios has ever faced anything like what Manny brings into the ring. Having fought Larios three times, I know that he has the heart of a true warrior and can't be discounted. If anyone can upset Manny, it's Larios, so you can't sleep on him thinking it'll be a cakewalk. After all, he was a world champion for many years. I won't make a prediction on the bout since I'm friendly with both guys and I know that anything can happen in this sport."

What about a possible matchup against his sparring partner? "Manny's a friend but this is a business and when the bell goes off, friendships go out the window and it's all about winning in the ring. If god wills it and everything goes well, I would love a chance to fight Manny. I'm hungry for the spotlight and beating Manny would be the biggest accomplishment I could ever imagine. If that fight could be made, and I think it could be, I would love it."

At the moment, there is talk that WBO Bantamweight champ Jhonny Gonzalez might be an upcoming opponent. "I've heard that they want to make a fight with Johnny. Johnny's very good but I feel that I have to fight bigger names than him. It doesn't serve my purpose. I'd be more open to fighting someone like Rafael Marquez who has a lot more of a following and is more accomplished. I want to make the best of the next few years and beating Marquez would give me more recognition. If he's willing to step up in weight then I'll be here waiting for him."

The real "shot caller" for Vazquez is manager Frank Espinoza who agrees with his charge. "At this point in Israel's career we can't waste time against fighters that aren't bringing something to the table. Although nothing is a given in boxing, I'm confident that Israel will beat Ivan Hernandez. After Hernandez, we'll be looking for big names only. Israel has the WBC belt and "The Ring" championship belt. He definitely brings something to any negotiation. We'd love to go up against Marquez and if the chance to fight Pacquiao comes up, we'd be very happy to face him. I think Israel has a great shot against him," said Espinoza.

The devastating win over Larios has injected a new level of confidence in Vazquez. "I feel better than ever physically and mentally. I've got a great trainer and sparring partners that push me to be my best. This is my time and I know I have to make more of an impact. God has put in this position for a reason and I plan to make the most of it."

Catch Vazquez vs. Hernandez on HBO Pay-Per-View from Atlantic City on June 10th along with the main event pitting Bernard Hopkins against Antonio Tarver. Also on the card will be up and coming undefeated prospect Jorge Paez Jr.