

Why the Rooster Won't Cross That Road Just Yet

Written by Michael Katz

Wednesday, 21 June 2006 19:00

LAS VEGAS, June 22 – Oscar de la Hoya did not pull the plug on boxing. Instead, he offered Floyd Mayweather Jr. enough extension cord to hang himself. We shall explain.

Boxing's biggest star called a teleconference where, with us knowing he had already rejected a possible Sept. 16 date with the game's best boxer, it was widely expected that the Golden Boy would announce his retirement from the ring. I was ready to write boxing's obituary. Certainly, without de la Hoya's cover boy good looks, the Los Angeles Times would have shut the book on the game.

I was ready to bemoan ever calling him Chicken de la Hoya. I was prepared to set the record straight, to concede his place in the pantheon. He's no chicken. He's The Rooster, cock of the walk, strutting his way with more than a touch of arrogance.

More than 120 media types responded to his call, a "record" according to de la Hoya henchman Richard Schaefer (record? Who says, CompuBox or boxingrec.com?), and instead of pulling the plug, Oscar pulled our legs. He said he was not announcing his retirement, that he was "leaning" toward one more fight, that Floyd Mayweather Jr. was the only opponent he would deign to oppose, that there was no reason physically or financially to retire or continue boxing – basically, he said, he needed more time "to reflect."

He didn't want to feel "rushed" because the lead time necessary for a major Sept. 16 show was rapidly running out. He said it was "too soon to make that decision." Remember, he said, "I'm such an example for a lot of people." It's good to be the king, but it's not always easy.

So once again, de la Hoya leaves the audience waiting. I recently wrote that his fighting Mayweather would be the best thing he could do for boxing. It would be a match that would attract not only all ring fans and gamblers – imagine, Oscar opening as the 2-1 underdog – but the general public. It would be the grand old veteran (still a boy of 33) against the best in the game, a possible passing of the torch, tweaked by the subplot of de la Hoya's trainer, Floyd Mayweather Sr., in effect plotting to have his son knocked out. If de la Hoya and Ricardo Mayorga could do close to 900,000 pay-per-view buys, this could set all kinds of records.

De la Hoya did not rule it out. He just ruled out fighting again this year, but it was noted that May 5 comes out on a Saturday in 2007 and he always likes to fight on Cinco de Mayo weekend. He said the opponent had to be young Mayweather because he's the best. "Beating him would make me the best fighter in the world," said the Rooster, looking for another feather in his cap. "Once, a long time ago, I was on top of that list for a slight moment."

Trouble is, Mayweather can't afford to wait. What if de la Hoya sprains his back lifting up his baby? What if he decides that beating Ricardo Mayorga is as good as it figures to be for a farewell? Mayweather has already said life will go on and he has a Nov. 4 pay-per-view date – though Bob Arum, everybody's estranged promoter, is offering him \$8 million if he takes on

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Antonio Margarito on Oct. 7.

Mayweather doesn't have many other choices. Round up the usual prospects. Miguel Cotto, also promoted by Arum, is out with a bum hand. Ricky Hatton will not make himself available – wisely. Mayweather could wait and see who wins a couple of fights next month – Sugar Shane Mosley against Fernando Vargas, Carlos Baldomir against Arturo Gatti. The results would be in before any pay-per-view deadline for Nov. 4.

Pretty Boy wants the Nov. 4 date (or Oct. 7) with another fight around his birthday in February. That makes it very possible that he faces two tough opponents, say Margarito and Mosley. De la Hoya's point about fighting Mayweather was to go out as boxing's best. But what if Mayweather loses between now and May?

"I don't think there's anybody out there who can beat him," said de la Hoya, adding there was "no Plan B," it was Mayweather or the rocking chair.

He said the Mayweather camp knew what was at stake. "They know there's a big payday and they'll do the right thing," he said.

In other words, rather than stimulate boxing by promising to fight Mayweather, de la Hoya is hinting that the game's best be careful about any tough challenges. That's not only hurting Mayweather, whose public image needs him to fight the best available opponents or suffer the wrath of any "expert" whose name rhymes with "pisher." It also potentially hurts Margarito. It is a hell of a way for boxing's next great promoter to build up his sport.

De la Hoya says "I'm not greedy," as if you could tell that to his two-time conqueror and current "partner," Mosley, who for a possible third match was outraged to find the Golden Boy still demanding more than parity (and anyone who can turn down \$12 million to fight a guy he's already beaten twice would probably not make Team Mayweather anxious to enter into negotiations). But if he fights Mayweather, he wants it all his way – including a 154-pound weight limit (Oscar admits he's walking around now at 150 or 151) and ten-ounce gloves. Plus he wants the May 5 date, which would jeopardize Mayweather's birthday present to himself in February.

There's nothing sacrosanct about Oscar's date. The Cinco de Mayo isn't like Mexican Independence Day. It celebrates a Mexican military victory over a French force – French force, now there's an oxymoron. If that's all it takes to have a commemoration, every day of the year would be a holiday in Germany. Even de la Hoya would have to see the gold lining to waiting a month and having the fight fall on Father's Day weekend as a tribute to Floyd and his father, Oscar's trainer.

Think of the buildup. Forget Leno or Letterman. This is a fight made for Jerry Springer or, for more upscale ticket buyers, Dr. Phil. Dyslectic families sell. It could be the perfect crossover bridge for boxing. I'm sorry to give de la Hoya something more to think about. His indecision is becoming the stuff of Danish princes.

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He said it's been so nerve-wracking, trying to decide whether to fight or not to fight Sept. 16, that "every time I wake up in the morning, I find more hairs on my pillow."

He said he's gone back and forth maybe 30 or 40 times. "It's stressful."

Not even a sea voyage a couple of weeks ago on his vessel, the Tommy Crown – when he gets a full-sized yacht instead of that 74-foot bathtub toy, he said he would call it Thomas Crown – could help him.

He said he would make up his mind "probably by year's end, I just needed more time."

He said, "I wanted to be around the house and not thinking about it, I wanted to be on vacation and not thinking about it."

So it's come to this for boxing: think or swim.

OUTHOUSE: Me, for that last line....And welcome back Lou DaBully, who after his fighter, Jermain Taylor, was lucky to get a draw that retained his middleweight title, started berating ringside press members who, in the great majority, thought Winky Wright was the clear winner of the good, but not great, scrap in Memphis last weekend. Even the promoter said Wright had his chance to win but blew it by dancing in the 12th round – which, by the way, Winky won in any case – so how could DaBully think his guy was such a clear winner?

Let me say this. I don't lateral race horses. (Okay, children, let me tell you another story: Way back when, before there was television or Ipods, there was a great radio sportscaster named Clem McCarthy, famous for among other things, the call on the Joe Louis-Max Schmeling rematch that included the stirring, "Schmeling is down! Schmeling is down!" One Preakness race, however, Clem lost sight of the horses as they went behind a building on the backstretch. They went behind the shed with a horse whose jockey was in yellow silks in front, and came out. Except it wasn't the same horse. Mid-stretch, McCarthy realized his mistake and interrupted himself, "What am I saying?" to apologize and call the right horse in front. Another sportscaster, whose college football – pro football was a minor, minor, minor sport – broadcasts were replete with wrong calls, sarcastically tried to sympathize with McCarthy. This broadcaster would catch himself calling one man streaking down the field, realize he had the wrong guy, and simply "lateral" the ball to the real carrier. So McCarthy told him, "You can't lateral race horses.")

Off of television, and obviously influenced by the one-sided call of Jim Lampley, I scored it a draw. It was tough for me to see how cleverly Wright was blocking and parrying; the usual between-rounds slo-mos were few as HBO concentrated on the corners. But while I thought it was a close fight and there were many close rounds, and thus a draw seemed reasonable, I must bow to my ringside colleagues, most of whom saw Wright winning by 8-4 margins (Tim Dahlberg of the Associated Press, Kevin Iole of the Las Vegas Review-Journal, even Ron Borges of the Boston Globe). Rich Hoffer of Sports Illustrated had it 10-2 in rounds for Winky, who certainly was never in any kind of trouble – despite Lampley repeatedly saying Taylor was landing the harder punches – while the champion looked in distress a few times. The only dissenters were Dandy Dan Rafael and a couple of bald New York writers, obviously impressed

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with Taylor's shaved skull.

Give Taylor credit. He has fought Bernard Hopkins twice and now Wright to very close decisions. He's 2-0-1 in those last three fights. He could be 3-0 or 0-3. At least he's competitive with the best. I don't think Emanuel Steward – HBO's house Hall of Fame trainer – made that much of a difference.

It was not a great fight because both men staggered down the stretch. Wright should have known better to trust the judges and safely coast in the last couple of rounds. He was allowed to coast because Taylor did nothing to make him fight. How anyone can think he won the last round is beyond me. He did nothing, zilch, nada. There was one ineffective flurry.

And I don't want to hear any whines from Winky or Gary Shaw, another estranged promoter. Shaw did not watch Wright's back – obviously ticked that the fighter tried to dump him. How else to explain how there was a Michigan referee (Frank Garza, who did a fine job, by the way) when Steward is from that state? Worse, how to explain Judge Chuck Giampa, who had Taylor beating Hopkins by two points being allowed to repeat that performance? Or to explain Melvina Lathan, who had Wright winning by only two points against Sam Solimon, being allowed ringside where she scored this bout a draw? And what was this fight doing in Taylor's backyard? It demanded neutrality.

There, of course, should be a rematch, but DaBully has a point – his guy has come off 36 stressful rounds with Hopkins and Wright and deserves a cupcake.

Wright, who remains No. 2 on my pound-for-pound list, deserves to have de la Hoya think about him in case young Mayweather has one of those bad nights fighters frequently suffer.

Oh, and let's put in the OUTHOUSE the local promoters whose outrageous prices kept the arena almost half empty.

PENTHOUSE: HBO Boxing After Dark for a doubleheader this Saturday outdoors in the Caesars Palace cauldron (temperatures may reach 112 degrees, I may not reach ringside and watch from my air-conditioned home) with two matches of undefeated kids, heavyweights Calvin Brock and Timur Ibragimov, welterweights Joel Julio and Carlos Quintana. Good, meaningful show.