

David Nino Rodriguez, Heavy Heart and Heavy Hands

Written by Robert Mladinich
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When hard-punching, undefeated heavyweight David “Nino” Rodriguez of El Paso, Texas, steps into the ring at the Fifth Third Ball Park at Comstock Park in Grand Rapids, Michigan, on Saturday, July 15, it will be with a heart that is even heavier than his hands.

The 6’4”, 245-pound Rodriguez will be putting his 21-0 (20 KOS) record on the line against Dan Whetzel, 7-7-1 (4 KOS), of Toledo, Ohio. The 34-year-old Whetzel, who was stopped early by East Coast prospects Vinny Maddalone and Michael Marrone in his last two fights, isn’t expected to put up much resistance.

No one would be surprised if the 28-year-old Rodriguez makes Whetzel his 19th first round knockout victim. While it might seem that Rodriguez has been fighting nothing but lambs since turning pro in September 1998, a closer look at his record suggests that he deserves the benefit of the doubt for several reasons.

Among Rodriguez’s first round knockout victims are Cruz Quintana, who was 10-1, and Tommy Connelly, who was 8-1. He has also blasted out veterans Jeff Pegues and Jeff Lally, both of whom usually put up at least a round or two more of obligatory resistance before being stopped.

His original opponent for July 15 was “Big” Rick Dyer of Roland, Oklahoma, who is 10-0 (10 KOS), seven of which came in the first round. Dyer, who is 6’9” tall and 300 pounds, pulled out of the fight just a few days before it was scheduled to happen.

The philosophical Rodriguez, who is both the Texas and New Mexico heavyweight champion, has much more important things than boxing to be concerned with these days.

On June 21, one of his best friends, fellow heavyweight hopeful Preston Hartzog, died at the age of 29 inside of his Los Angeles apartment, most likely from a heart attack. To say Rodriguez was devastated would be an understatement.

“Preston was the real deal, just a great guy and a man of his word,” said Rodriguez. “He was a great friend who will not be forgotten. This fight, and the rest of my career, will be for Preston.”

The southpaw Hartzog, a native of Bogalusa, Louisiana, whose nickname was “The Bogalusa Boogiemán,” was the brother of AnnaBeth Goodman, who several years ago began promoting fights in her native state under the banner of Kingfish Promotions. Her husband is actor John Goodman.

At the time of his death, the southpaw Hartzog, a onetime amateur standout on the United States Army boxing team, was 15-1-1 (4 KOS) as a pro. Although he was trained by the inimitable Jesse Reid, he put his boxing career on hold after a six round decision loss to journeyman Willie Chapman in Las Vegas in August 2005.

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He wanted to devote more time to his fledgling acting career.

Both he and Rodriguez had been friends through good times and bad and were each other's biggest fans and most stalwart supporters. Rodriguez was so crestfallen over Hartzog's death, those closest to him wondered if he would ever recover.

"Those guys were tight," said Benny "Big Dog" Henderson, Rodriguez's publicist. "But even with the loss of his friend weighing on his mind, he still put his time and effort into the gym. He knows the cost of being a fighter and he is definitely paying his dues."

Less than one month ago, Rodriguez's future looked so bright and he had so much to be happy about. He was thrilled to be fighting a fellow unbeaten heavyweight in Dyer, and was confident that the victory would help bring his career to the next level.

It didn't bother him one bit that that he would be giving up more than 50 pounds and five inches in height to the former Tough Man champion on the Arkansas/Oklahoma circuit.

"Any man that size is going to be dangerous," said the candid Rodriguez. "But although he is much bigger than me doesn't necessarily mean he is stronger. I think he will be surprised with my power."

From the look of Rodriguez's record, it seems that all of his opponents might have been surprised by his two-fisted power. Henderson hopes that as Rodriguez continues his ascension through the ranks, they continue to underestimate him.

"He is a very skilled fighter with power in both hands," proclaimed Henderson.

Perhaps even more important than his power is the emotional jolt that Rodriguez received after the untimely passing of his best friend. Because Rodriguez is a fighter at his very core, Big Dog believes that he will only draw strength from Hartzog's memory.

"The best way to pay tribute to a late friend is to continue the dream," said Henderson. "David is continuing his journey to stake his claim as a legitimate heavyweight. The rest of his career is going to be fought in memory of Preston.

"He is on a mission," continued Henderson. "And Nino will not be denied."