

Ranked Fighters Heather Percival and Monica Lovato Collide

Written by David A. Avila
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Though Fontana's Heather Percival and New Mexico's Monica Lovato live thousands of miles apart, the two share a heated passion for boxing and a realistic goal of capturing a world championship belt.

Others won't fight them, so they'll fight each other.

Lovato and Percival meet in a six round affair at Morongo Casino on Friday night, on a fight card promoted by Two Feathers Promotion.

"These are two very good fighters," said Al Franco, one of the co-promoters of the fight card.

Percival, like her opponent Lovato, bolted from anonymity and now is highly ranked in the junior bantamweight division in a span of two years. One is known for a smooth boxing style, the other an aggressive hard-punching fighter.

But that's only part of their story.

Lovato (7-1, 4 KOs) was introduced to boxing while dating her high school sweetheart. Then one day a car accident took his life and left her with only memories of his love for boxing.

"I moved to Albuquerque and was going to a hospital for a job interview and saw a boxing club. I stopped by but it was always closed," said Lovato, 28, a 5-5 tall brunette who is originally from Espanola near Santa Fe, New Mexico. "One day it was open and I started boxing."

After several years of amateur level boxing, the New Mexico woman decided to move to the professional level.

"There were no fights for me at amateur. I only had 12 fights in four years," Lovato said.

In just her second pro fight, Lovato traveled to Southern California with only a member of her family to meet Orange County's amateur star Julie Rubalcava in Irvine two years ago. The two battled ferociously in a four round bout that ended with Lovato's first and only loss.

"My trainer said I was robbed, but it was a tough fight," Lovato remembers of the fight on June 24, 2004. "We could never get a rematch with her."

Since that day Lovato scored six consecutive wins with four knockouts. She's ranked number six by the WBC in the junior bantamweight division.

Now she faces Percival who's ranked number seven by the WBA in the junior bantamweight division.

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Percival

As a teen, Percival (8-2) was headstrong with a need to express herself physically. She saw female boxing on television and decided that was for her. But like Lovato, the amateurs did not prove to be the answer. After a brief absence from the sport, she returned with a fire in her belly for pro boxing.

"I didn't have time for boxing," said Percival, 23, a 5-5 tall blonde who grew up in a Latino dominated neighborhood of Fontana. "But when I quit one of my jobs I suddenly had the time."

In her first two pro bouts she battled with Tracy Carlton, a much bigger opponent and managed to outbox her in back to back fights as a junior lightweight. Then in her third pro fight, she dropped down close to her true fighting weight at 118 and met the aggressive Reiko Maruyama of Japan, and was victorious with a stylish display of boxing. Fans were impressed.

"She threw smooth quick punches," said one boxing writer of a Southland newspaper. "I knew right then she was going to be good."

Eagerly seeking another fight, Percival found herself traveling to Tacoma, Washington to meet Jeannine Garside making her pro debut. The Fontana boxer lost decisively and later discovered Garside was a triple amateur national featherweight champion in Canada.

"She was too big for Heather," said Larry Ramirez who trains and manages Percival.

After three successive wins, Percival traveled to Utah to meet Terri Cruz for the IFBA bantamweight title. She lost by a split-decision.

A win last April against Tonia Cravens in a six round bout left Percival poised for another title match if she can beat Lovato.

"I know that she is an aggressive southpaw fighter," said Percival.

Invisible ceiling

Both female boxers have hit an invisible ceiling due to their fighting reputations.

"In my first year I fought five times, last year four times. I've only had one fight this year," Percival said. "I'm just grateful having a fight."

Both fighters work, train and go to school with a schedule that might drive a normal person into lunacy.

Lovato heads a boxing gym for more than three-dozen youngsters at the Lucero Center in Espanola that she helped found for the local kids. She also attends college and works out whenever she can.

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“My family tells me ‘you stretch every minute of the day’ but that’s the way I’ve always been,” says Lovato, who also likes to skydive.

Lovato’s opponent has an equally demanding schedule.

Percival sparred 12 rounds on Sunday morning, went to work at 2 p.m., and will end her job as a manager for a local movie theater complex around 2 a.m. Then she’ll awake and to return to work at 6 a.m. She can’t even get four hours of sleep.

“I’m doing it so I can free up a couple of days before the fight,” Percival says.

Both fighters treat every minute of the day like it’s their last.

“I’ve had four or five bouts fall out,” Lovato said. “If I have to go to California then that’s what I’ll do.”

Percival can relate to Lovato’s dilemma.

“I’ve fought in the other fighter’s area. You can’t worry about that,” Percival says.

On Friday, time will have to stop when the two junior bantamweight contenders meet in the ring.

“You’re going to see two really good women fighters,” said Fontana’s Ramirez. “Win or lose it’s going to be a good fight.”

Other junior bantamweights and bantamweights to watch:

Elena “Baby Doll” Reid (17-3-5), 24, fights out of Las Vegas and mostly campaigns at 115 pounds. She’s very strong and has fought some of the best fighters in the world. Reid will be fighting in late August in Lake Tahoe. The opponent may be Mary Ortega (28-2-1) but it has not been finalized.

Melinda Cooper (17-0), 21, also fights out of Las Vegas and has speed and power to burn. A match against Heather Percival fell and a second one failed to materialize. But the world champion can fight from junior bantamweight to featherweight. She’s electrifying.

Mariana Juarez (17-4-3), 26, the Mexico City native has not fought in over a year due to a recurring arm problem. She now lives in Southern California and is trying to remedy the problem. When healthy, she may be one of the best fighters in the world. Who wouldn’t like to see Juarez and Cooper? That would be the best female fight of the year if it could ever be made.

Ana Maria Torres (13-2-1), 26, she’s another Mexico City native, but unlike Juarez, she would rather brawl than box. No one knows her true boxing record but she most definitely has more than 16 pro fights. Torres learned why Juarez lost her last fight. You can’t win in Korea. The judges already know who’s going to win before the fight’s over as Torres found out last month.