

## Rahman Descends from Big Bear to meet Maskaev

Written by David A. Avila

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In the past, many boxing fans saw Hasim Rahman as a fighter with a wheelbarrow full of talent who just didn't care enough about winning the heavyweight world title.

Those days are over.

"Man, I had so many problems with my promoters, I couldn't think straight," said Rahman while working out at the LB4LB Boxing Gym in West Los Angeles. "Man, I'm happy now."

WBC heavyweight titleholder Rahman faces former foe Oleg Maskaev (32-5, 25 KOs) on Saturday at the Thomas and Mack Center in Las Vegas. That smiling face and sense of contentment has fueled him to a feeling of boxing nirvana.

"It's been different for me now that I don't have to worry about everything like my money, tickets, friends and all kinds of things you wouldn't believe," Rahman (41-5-2, 33 KOs) said.

Rahman has descended from the 10,000 feet elevation of Big Bear, California to the desert of Las Vegas ready to defend his WBC title once more.

Now he faces Maskaev, a former Soviet Union product now living in Staten Island, who actually knocked Rahman out of the ring for a thrilling come-from-behind knockout victory in 1999.

"I think he took more punishment than I did in that fight," Rahman says. "Look at what happened after that fight. He got knocked out three times."

Though Maskaev has not fought a top contender since losing to Corey Sanders in 2002, he believes the experience gained in the ring and in the gym have made him far superior to that fighter that belted Rahman out of the ring like in a B-movie.

"It's going to be a totally different fight because it's been six years," said Maskaev, during a telephone press conference. "We are totally different fighters now."

The heavyweight title fight has been billed "America's Last Defense" because of the dominance by fighters from the former Soviet Union who now hold three of the four more recognized world title belts in the heavyweight division. Rahman is seen as the only American left. Well, not quite. Maskaev is an American citizen now.

"I got my citizenship two years ago," Maskaev said, who moved to this country in 1994. "Yes it bothers me because whoever wins this fight is going to be American."

Maskaev knows how to prepare for war. He was a lieutenant in the Russian Army for seven years.

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His new coach Victor Valle, who formerly trained Irish Gerry Cooney a heavyweight contender in the 80s, says Maskaev has been polished into a jewel.

“I work on the weaknesses of a fighter and whatever they are I try to strengthen them every which way,” said Valle by telephone. “Oleg is a very good student and is like Arnold Schwarzenegger [when] he says, ‘hasta la vista baby.’”

Rahman has been camped in Big Bear Lake with a number of fellow heavyweights who are going at it every day.

“He’s rough,” says Chris Arreola, an undefeated heavyweight from Riverside. “I’ve learned a lot about preparation. It’s motivating to be in a camp with someone like Rahman.”

Another undefeated heavyweight Travis Kauffmann echoes those sentiments.

“We’ve been working on what Oleg does best in his fights, the right hand,” said Kauffman, whose dad formerly trained Kermit Cintron. “He’s going to be more than ready for Maskaev.”

In Rahman’s last bout he survived a 12-round slugfest with James Toney and expects an easier fight from Maskaev.

“I’m going to throw a lot of punches. If I see a good chin shot, I’ll go for it,” says Rahman. “I’ll beat him up.”

### Soto and Valle

One fight that should not go unnoticed pits two heavy-hitting Mexican junior lightweights against each other in Humberto Soto and Ivan Valle. What makes it special is both come from Los Mochis. Boxers from that town think backing up is cowardly.

Soto gave Rocky Juarez his first loss last year that shocked many in the boxing world. Until then, few knew about Soto.

“That fight made people pay attention to me,” said Soto, who still lives in Los Mochis, Mexico. “Now I get to fight for the title if I win this fight.”

Valle is another tall 130-pounder who can crack with either hand. He basically retired Angel Vasquez in 2003 after stopping him in three rounds. He’s not the flashiest of fighters, he’s just there to knock you out.

Both Soto and Valle are battling for the interim WBC junior lightweight title. The winner gets a crack at Marco Antonio Barrera should he beat Juarez in September.

“I just want an opportunity to win the world title,” Soto said.

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### **Santa Cruz and Diaz**

California's Jose Armando Santa Cruz meets Chicago's David Diaz in a lightweight bout featuring boxers who never stop punching.

Santa Cruz is trained by Rudy Hernandez and has the NABF title he captured by winning a hard-fought decision over Edner Cherry in February.

Diaz (31-1-1, 16 KOs) has beaten some pretty good fighters in his career including Silverio Ortiz, Ener Julio and Emanuel Augustus. The Chicagoan doesn't have a long reach but uses his stamina to get the job done. This fight should be all action.