Written by David A. Avila
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Every time Carlos “Famoso” Hernandez jumps in the ring he carries an entire country on his back.

It’s an enormous burden.

Hernandez faces Brooklyn’s Kevin Kelley (58-7-2, 39 KOs) in a battle of former world champions at the Municipal Auditorium in San Antonio, Texas on Thursday, Sept. 28. The important contest is promoted by Top Rank and will be televised on the Outdoor Life Network.

For El Salvador’s Hernandez, the first and only world champion prizefighter in its history, he knows millions of fans in his country and in this country await the outcome of each and every one of his fights.

“There’s a lot of pressure on me every time I step in the ring,” said Hernandez (42-6-1, 24 KOs), who is the former IBF junior lightweight titleholder. “Let’s be honest, I have to win this fight.”

When Hernandez and his wife Veronica visit El Salvador it’s almost a national event. His fights are broadcast all over the country. The president of the country attended several of his fights and Famoso’s face is even known to non-fight fans.

Opposing El Salvador’s hero is Kelley, 39, a former featherweight world champion with a ton of experience.

“He’s been in a lot of wars and a lot of classics,” said Hernandez, 35. “You see a guy like that and it inspires you to be at your best. If not, you get taken.”

Kelley’s boxed with some of the best fighters to ever fight at featherweight or junior lightweight including Erik Morales, Marco Antonio Barrera, and Humberto Soto. Perhaps his most famous encounter came in 1997 when he collided with England’s Prince Naseem Hamed in a slugfest.

“The fight with Hamed and Kelley was a war between two little power punchers,” said Mario Perez, a boxing analyst for a Spanish language television station. “That fight put the featherweights on the map. That’s why guys like Hamed and Barrera began making six figures.”

One of Kelley’s victims was a tough Mexican fighter named Humberto Soto, who is now ranked at number one by the WBC in the junior lightweight division.

“I was too young and inexperienced for Kelley,” Soto said. “He’s a smart fighter.”
Despite seven losses and two draws on his record, Kelley has speed and power.

“He’s dangerous,” Hernandez said.

Hernandez is no slouch himself.

In 2004 Hernandez met Steve Forbes, who held the IBF junior lightweight title at the time, at the Staples Center. Though the fight was stopped because of a nasty cut over Hernandez’s eyes, the Salvadoran had racked up enough points to score a win and become his country’s first world champion.

In his first title defense, Hernandez willingly accepted a fight with Mexico’s Morales. Though he gave all he could, Morales used his longer reach and mobility to score a unanimous decision and take the title.

Not wanting to give up, Hernandez accepted a slew of murderous punching opponents in consecutive fashion. First came Juan Carlos Ramirez. Then came Jesus Chavez, the current IBF lightweight titleholder. And then came Bobby Pacquiao. Though Hernandez lost to Chavez in a gritty fight, the loss to Pacquiao made him sick.

“I wanted to quit boxing,” said Hernandez. “I didn’t want to see it or hear about it.”

A horrid judge’s decision tabbed Hernandez with a loss and boxing seemed unimportant.

“I thought I clearly won,” he said.

After spending time with his family and partaking in domestic activities, he found support from the people on the street.

“People were walking up to me in the supermarket and in parking lots telling me that I had won the fight,” said Hernandez, who won his last match in San Antonio last July against Sean Plessis by unanimous decision. “That made me feel really good about boxing again.”

Hernandez has been fighting since 1992 and now with a family in tow, he’s looking at the future that lies outside of boxing.

“I’m looking for those big fights,” said Hernandez, whose wife Veronica manages him along with their two children. “If I’m successful against Kelley, I can see myself moving up in weight.”

Though his entire career has been fought at the 130-pound limit, the fighter known as “El Famoso” feels it’s time to test the bigger boys.

“I can see myself against the best in the lightweight division,” he says.

But first comes Kelley.

“He’s a smart fighter,” Hernandez says.