

Diego Corrales the New Alexis Arguello

Written by David A. Avila
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Diego “Chico” Corrales defends his WBC lightweight world title on Saturday Oct. 7, against Cuba’s mean-spirited Joel Casamayor (33-3-1) but what gets lost in translation can’t be described in the boxing ring.

During the last three years Corrales (40-3, 33 KOs) has slowly captured the hearts of millions of fans, but not with his deadly punching power. It’s his gentlemanly conduct and sportsmanship that attracts the most attention.

“Diego can’t walk anywhere without people crowding around him,” said Giovanni Flores, a boxing fan who spotted Corrales in Hollywood one night. “Everybody wants to talk to him or buy him a dinner. He talks to everybody like he knows them.”

Not since Alexis Arguello roamed the prizefighting circuit in the ‘70s and ‘80s has a boxer like Corrales endeared himself to the public with extraordinary manners and goodwill.

In boxing there are many well-mannered prizefighters or ambassadors that come to mind – such as Sugar Shane Mosley, Oscar De La Hoya, Evander Holyfield, Chris Byrd, Jermain Taylor and Juan Diaz – fighters who refuse to badmouth or bait opponents into a war of words. Corrales takes it another step and heaps praise on potential opponents such as Coachella’s Julio Diaz or Florida’s Nate Campbell.

“Julio Diaz is a great fighter. He has tremendous talent,” Corrales said enthusiastically.

Corrales had this to say about Campbell: “He has all the tools to be a champion for a long time.”

What kind of attitude is that for a devastating knockout artist like Corrales, who has one of the greatest knockout ratios of all time for a lightweight? Only one fighter has gone the distance against Corrales since 1999 and that’s Casamayor.

“Corrales is a one-dimensional fighter. I can beat him any way,” said Casamayor, a former titleholder as a junior lightweight.

Lately, the Cuban has attempted to bait Corrales into a psyche war but it hasn’t materialized. Casamayor accused Corrales of speaking ill of his family.

“I never brought anybody’s family into this,” said Corrales during a telephone press conference. “I predict a great fight.”

That’s about as ornery as Corrales gets outside of the ring, but inside those ropes, it’s another story.

Before Corrales fought Jose Luis Castillo in their first bout in May 2005, both exchanged cordial

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words and no one expected the furious battle that became not only the fight of the year, but the fight of the 21st century.

“When I see that fight I get goose bumps,” said Julio Diaz, who is primed to fight for a world title at the end of this month.

The New York Jets football team recently showed that fight to pump up the team before a crucial game a few weeks ago.

Corrales is one of the few professional fighters that others in his field will pay to see fight. If you look at a tape of the first Corrales-Castillo match you can spot James Toney, Winky Wright, Shane Mosley and many others rooting for the 135-pounder.

There’s not a nicer guy outside of the ring than Corrales. But inside the ropes, the face changes, the posture becomes bent, and those fists look like two battle-ready clubs ready for some more notches.

Back in the early ‘80s Nicaragua’s Arguello was a similar character.

When Arguello fought the wound-up Aaron Pryor for the WBA junior welterweight title in 1982, the pair met in a press conference for the first time.

Pryor snarled into a microphone that he was “the real champion” and looked at Arguello who replied, “and a great world champion.” Pryor stumbled a bit not expecting that from his opponent, and then said, “oh, thank you man.”

But once inside the ring Pryor and Arguello set the sports world on fire with their momentous battle. The world saw the ferocious Pryor win that fight and the second, but the conduct displayed by the pair after the fight won the hearts of millions of fans who still applaud Arguello today like some lost prince.

A year earlier, in Atlantic City, Arguello met a young bull of a fighter named Ray “Boom Boom” Mancini for the WBC lightweight title. After 14 rounds a left hook left the young Italian fighter on queer street and it was soon over as the Nicaraguan’s firepower proved to much for the younger fighter. But after the fight, Arguello spoke into the microphone, hugged his fallen opponent, and told the world how he loved Mancini’s father and him and predicted a world title for the kid. There wasn’t a dry eye in the place.

It’s moments like those that make boxing the sport among sports. The three epic battles in 2002 and 2003 between Arturo Gatti and Mickey Ward inspired many with their ferocity inside the ring and classy behavior toward each other outside the ring. Much like Arguello.

“Arguello had that sense of class that you can’t teach,” said Dean Campos, a boxing trainer out of Montebello. “Diego Corrales is a lot like him.”

When Corrales steps inside the ring to face Casamayor for the third time, don’t expect a smile

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on the tall, lean boxer. But after that fight, win or lose, the gentleman of boxing returns.

“This is my sport, I love it,” Corrales says. “I want everybody to love my sport as much as I do.”