

## Another Mexico-Philippine War: Ponce de Leon vs. Penalosa

Written by David A. Avila

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Mexico's powerful Daniel Ponce de Leon defends his WBO junior featherweight against veteran Gerry Penalosa of the Philippines on Saturday. Both are southpaws.

"It's an interesting match," says matchmaker Eric Gomez of Golden Boy Promotions.

A rediscovery of the Philippine prizefighter has boxing promoters antsy about matching that country's fighters with Mexican world champions like Ponce De Leon at the Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino. The fight will be shown on HBO pay-per-view.

Boxing fans seem to perk up now when Mexicans fight Filipinos.

Just a few years ago it was rare to see Filipino prizefighters in this country, but since Manny Pacquiao roared into the scene with a number of big wins, boxing fans realize that the Asian island nation has plenty of talent.

A big wave of Filipino fighters have descended into California with many making the Wild Card Boxing Gym in Hollywood their central headquarters. On any given day there are half a dozen Filipino boxers working out with Freddie Roach and Eric Brown.

Penalosa is one of the veterans of the Filipino fight scene. He captured a world title 10 years ago with a split-decision victory over Hiroshi Kawashima in Tokyo. Now 34 years old, many boxing fans had forgotten the veteran. But the boxer known as "Fearless" has not loss a fight in five years.

"I'm excited about this fight," says Penalosa (51-5-2, 34 KOs), who formerly held the WBC junior bantamweight title. "This is for a world title. This is the kind of fight I've been waiting for."

During the last two years Penalosa has targeted Ponce De Leon.

"I know his style very well," Penalosa says. "I've fought all kinds of fighters in my career. I know how to box fighters like him."

Though it's difficult to fight left-handed boxers, even for left-handers, Penalosa remains confident.

"Southpaws are common in the Philippines," said Billy King, an advisor to Penalosa. "He has no problems fighting southpaws."

But can current champion Ponce de Leon handle a crafty veteran like Penalosa?

"I know Ponce de Leon is not pretty to look at and doesn't have a beautiful style, but he is very strong," said Joe Hernandez, who manages Ponce de Leon.

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The Mexican native Tarahumara Indian has bludgeoned his way through a variety of boxing styles: from peek-a-boo defense first boxers to the raw punishing brawlers, Ponce de Leon has emerged mostly victorious.

“There aren’t any boxers from where I come from,” says Ponce de Leon who often wears his native headdress inside the ring before the fight begins. “I’m the only one from my family or from my area that boxes.”

Because of the void of boxing in his area, Ponce de Leon has literally battered his way to victory. He also made the Mexican Olympic team in 2000.

“I don’t think he’s reached his potential,” said Hernandez who’s managed several world champions including Mike Anchondo and Edwin Valero. “It’s his strength and conditioning that have made him what he is today.”

Only one fighter Celestino Caballero was able to withstand his murderous punches and today that same boxer is the WBA junior featherweight world titleholder. But even Caballero struggled mightily to beat Ponce de Leon by boxing and withstanding heavy blows from the Mexican.

“I don’t think he can take my punches,” Ponce de Leon says confidently. “I’m looking for the quick knockout.”

Penalosa smiles when he hears comments about knockouts.

“I love fighting guys like him,” Penalosa says.

### **Hopkins cousin**

Demetrius Hopkins, who’s a cousin of light heavyweight world champion Bernard Hopkins, meets runner-up to this year’s Contender champion Steve Forbes on one of the pay-per-view fights from Las Vegas this Saturday. The USBA junior welterweight title is at stake.

Forbes lost by decision to Grady Brewer at the Staples Center this past September. He’s a former junior lightweight world titleholder but is now fighting as a junior welterweight.

The rise of Hopkins to the top of the junior welterweight list has been a tedious adventure. At first his seemingly lack of power made each bout contentious. But his skills and inner toughness kept him undefeated. But in the last year the Philadelphia boxer has discovered his power.

Can Forbes withstand a taller and stronger fighter like Hopkins? That’s the real question. There’s no doubt he has the boxing skills, but moving up too far in weight makes it a more level playing field for his opponents. He can’t hurt them.

### **Klitschko wins big**

Wladimir Klitschko burrowed through Ray Austin’s meager defense like a scythe through wheat.

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It doesn't get much easier than that.

It took two rounds to discover that Austin didn't belong in the same ring with Klitschko who was making his second defense of the IBF heavyweight title.

Now who's next?

Right across the Ukraine border lives WBA heavyweight titleholder Nicolai Valuev, the seven-foot giant from Russia who's begging for a showdown with Klitschko. It makes a lot of sense.

For one thing a match between these two former Soviet boxers can showcase the heavyweight talent coming out of that area. Along with Valuev and Klitschko, there's WBC titleholder Oleg Maskaev and Wladimir's big brother Vitali Klitschko who's is out of retirement.

If that's not enough there's Sultan Ibragimov who blitzed through Orange County's Javier "Monster" Mora in 46 seconds last Saturday. Ibragimov comes from Russia too and was supposed to meet WBO heavyweight titleholder Shannon Briggs. But the champion contracted pneumonia and was unable to fight.

This year should be a pretty interesting development for heavyweights, if they agree to fight each other.

### **Fights on television**

Fri. ESPN2, 6 p.m., Vlademir Pereira (24-1) vs. Eric Aiken (16-5).

Fri. Telefutura, 8 p.m., Celestino Caballero (25-2) vs. Ricardo Castillo (27-3).

Sat. HBO pay-per-view, 6 p.m., Marco Antonio Barrera (63-4) vs. Juan Manuel Marquez (46-3-1); Daniel Ponce de Leon (30-1) vs. Gerry Penalosa (51-5-2); Demetrius Hopkins (25-0-1) vs. Steve Forbes (32-4).