Two men in their 70s Joe Chavez and Rafael Garcia will enter the arena carrying their buckets, wraps and bandages and be confined to the background while the biggest money fight in boxing history takes place.

It's business as usual for both boxing corner men of Mexican descent. They've been doing it for more than 40 years.

Though few will notice the pair, for millions of boxing fans throughout the world Chavez and Garcia's work inside the ring for the fight between WBC junior middleweight titleholder Oscar De La Hoya and challenger Floyd Mayweather at the MGM Grand could mean the difference between winning or losing on Cinco de Mayo.

Boxing fans know the history of De La Hoya and Mayweather, who both began at the junior lightweight level and proceeded to win world titles in multiple weight divisions. But few know their history of mangled hands and broken knuckles suffered from years of boxing in both the professional and amateur levels.

Those years of pounding on heavy bags, sparring with hardheaded boxers and against the elite prizefighters of the world take a toll on the bones and ligaments of a boxer's hands.

When Muhammad Ali fought his hands were so brittle and pain-ridden his fists were injected with painkillers before each fight. Without the numbing perhaps Ali would not have survived to fight the now legendary wars against Joe Frazier, George Foreman and Ken Norton.

It's the same for Mayweather and De La Hoya. Their fists have been traumatized throughout their careers where each needs the best in the business to attend their fragile instruments of punishment.

Proof of Mayweather's fragility came when he was rampaging through the junior lightweight division with little opposition until he met Carlos "Famoso" Hernandez back in May 2001. During that fight the lightning fast Mayweather hurt his hands so bad he nearly fell to the ground in pain.

"If I knew that he had hurt both hands I would have attacked more," said Hernandez from his home in Texas. "I didn't know at the time he had injured both hands."

Knowing that his hands were the key to his success Mayweather sought out a corner man who was known to work miracles with boxers who had fragile hands.

"He's the best hand wrapper in the world," says Mayweather of Garcia.

Enter Garcia with his trademark cap adorned with tiny medals and whose former clients would

make any boxing fan's Hall of Fame list.

"I worked with Alexis Arguello, Wilfredo Gomez, Bazooka Limon, Roberto Duran," says Garcia, who wraps Mayweather's hands during his workouts and fights.

Ironically Garcia was born in Puebla, Mexico where the famous Battle of Puebla took place that is now celebrated and called Cinco de Mayo. He began as a boxer and slowly worked his way north.

"When I moved to the United States I lived in Reno first," said Garcia by telephone. "Now I live in Las Vegas."

For the wizard hand wrapper, his big break came when Top Rank Promotions sent him to California to a medical doctor specializing on bones.

"I learned a lot from that doctor who showed me the different bones and how they work," said Garcia who began as a boxer in fight shows in Mexico City.

The hand-wrapping expert has needed every scrap of information to keep Mayweather healthy enough to stay in the ring. But in his last fight against Carlos Baldomir, the speedy fighter nearly stopped the fight because of severe pain in his right hand. He withstood the pain and ultimately won by a landslide unanimous decision.

"Floyd has a lot of confidence in me," says Garcia who can usually be found in one of many boxing gyms in Las Vegas when Mayweather is not training. "He's the best fighter in the world."

Chavez

Joe Chavez began boxing in Los Angeles and had a handful of fights at both the Grand Olympic Auditorium and the Hollywood Legion Stadium during the 1950s. Later he became a trainer and manager of professional prizefighters. He first met De La Hoya at the old Resurrection Gym in East Los Angeles in the early 1980s.

"I first saw Oscar when he was just eight years old," says Chavez, who roamed the boxing gyms in East L.A. such as the Cleland House boxing club, Hollenbeck Youth Center and the famous Main Street Gym in downtown Los Angeles. "I always used to see him around the gyms."

Chavez was already managing and training fighters like Bobby Padilla, Ray Saldivar and Alan De La Torre. One of his brightest prospects came from Mexico City and when he returned home after a fight he was killed.

"He was running in Chapultepec Park and someone killed him," said Chavez. "Nobody knows what happened or why. He used to spar with Carlos Palomino."

Success didn't seem to be going in Chavez's direction. But throughout the years his ability to wrap hands and serve as a cut man brought him to the attention of the more recognized

fighters.

When De La Hoya suffered a career threatening broken left hand during a sparring session in December 2000 - the same hand that delivers his lethal left hook and stifling left jab - it forced him to postpone a scheduled fight against Russia's Roman Karmazin.

Numerous fighters had spoken about Chavez's hand wrapping work and De La Hoya's team was desperate to find someone who could prevent their fighter from re-breaking the left hand. They called Chavez.

The East Los Angeles trainer and corner man drove to the Golden Boy Boxing Club (that was formerly the Resurrection Boxing Club) and was given an audition. After wrapping De La Hoya's hands and trying out Chavez's handiwork, the job was given to him then and there. His first fight was on June 23, 2001 when Spaniard Javier Castillejo defended his WBC junior middleweight title against De La Hoya.

Never satisfied with his work, the Los Angeles-based corner man constantly tinkers with different hand wrappings and settings. With De La Hoya, he uses makeshift ligaments fashioned from tape that he rolls up and places in between the fingers. They look like pieces of string. Then he wraps the hands with the gauze so that the fists fit snugly into the boxing glove.

"I mold it to the hand," says Chavez who also works with Manny Pacquiao. "I use my imagination to think of ways to wrap a hand. I make changes."

Regardless if it's De La Hoya, Pacquiao or a four-round fighter, Chavez works with a large variety of fighters when time permits.

"I like to go to small venues. I take the same care," Chavez says. "I take pride in my work."

Garcia says that his rival is one of the best in their business.

"We exchange ideas about wrapping hands and cuts," Garcia says.

Chavez said both he and Garcia provide their fighters with protection so they can perform at a high degree.

"You have to protect their hands," said Chavez. "You wouldn't send a soldier to war with a dirty rifle."

After the mega fight between Mayweather and De La Hoya don't be surprised to see Chavez and Garcia walking side by side. Though rivals inside the ring, outside they're like brothers.

"I'm glad people finally recognize Joe Chavez as one of the best in the business," said Garcia.

Chavez speaks glowingly about Garcia too.

“We’re very good friends,” he says. “Nobody is better than Rafael Garcia.”

Fights on television

Wed. ESPN2, 6 p.m., Yory Boy Campas (88-9) vs. Eromosele Albert (19-1).

Fri. Telefutura, 8 p.m., Hugo Cazares (24-3-1) vs. Wilfrido Perez (23-1-3).

Fri. Showtime, 11 p.m., Chris Arreola (19-0) vs. Devin Vargas (11-0).

Sat. HBO pay-per-view, 6 p.m., Oscar De La Hoya (38-4) vs. Floyd Mayweather (37-0); Rocky Juarez (26-3) vs. Jose Hernandez (22-3); Rey Bautista (22-0) vs. Sergio Medina (28-0); AJ Banal (12-0) vs. Juan Rosas (25-2).