

Best Class Of CA. Lightweights Since 90s?

Written by David A. Avila
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SOUTH EL MONTE, CA.---John Molina handles his headgear delicately, almost like a surgeon preparing to go into the operation room.

A sparring session is about to begin.

Inside the South El Monte boxing club about 40 boxers are working on various training regiments but that's all about to stop. Molina will be sparring Victor Ortiz, one of the most feared super lightweights in the area and everyone wants to see the results.

The three-minute buzzer goes off and both prizefighters approach each other carefully for good reason: each fighter has true one-punch stopping power.

"This is what it's all about," said Pete Hiranaka, a matchmaker and promoter.

A cluster of talented prizefighters in the lightweight divisions ranging from 130 to 140 pounds has emerged in Southern California that rivals the early 1990s when guys like Genaro Hernandez, Oscar De La Hoya, Shane Mosley, Rafael Ruelas, Zach Padilla and Gabriel Ruelas roamed the gyms.

"Yes, that was a pretty good group," said Rudy Hernandez who trained his brother Genaro and is a former prizefighter too. "But this group today is not as well known as that other group. Everybody already knew Shane Mosley and Oscar De La Hoya coming up."

On this Saturday morning, a number of junior lightweights, lightweights and super lightweights are all gathered in the South El Monte gym to test their skill and mettle. They arrive from Mexico, Nicaragua, Oxnard, Maywood, Lancaster and West Covina for a chance to trade punches with the best that have gathered.

WBO welterweight titleholder Antonio Margarito looks on with interest. He guides a young lightweight stud named Brian Ramirez who could be facing one of these fighters in the near future.

The sparring session between Molina and the rugged southpaw slugger Ortiz is calculating but energetic. Though the taller fighter is older his experience in the ring doesn't rival Ortiz who had a lengthy amateur career totaling more than 100 fights. Molina only had about a dozen.

"I was surprised by John Molina," said Robert Garcia who trains Ortiz in Oxnard. "He was able to land some shots the first two rounds."

After a three round session Ortiz and Molina both pat each other warmly. Outside of the ring they're very friendly. Inside the ropes it's much different. After all, there are reputations to maintain.

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“John and Victor really like each other,” said Joe Molina, John’s father. “It’s a good thing. They could hurt each other in there if they wanted.”

Lightweight contenders and prospects continue to emerge and sprout like lettuce every year. This year is a vintage group.

Brad Goodman, a boxing advisor and expert talent scout, said this lightweight group has a lot of potential for the near future.

“I really like this Victor Ortiz kid,” said Goodman by telephone from New York. “It’s amazing to see a young kid so dedicated.”

California lightweights

A number of dedicated lightweights are poised for bigger challenges but the best of all is IBF 135-pound lightweight world titleholder Julio “The Kidd” Diaz from Coachella.

Diaz captured the title for the second time when he beat Jesus Chavez in February by technical knockout.

Diaz has one of four major world titleholders and is considered to be the best by several experts. The other champions are Joel Casamayor, Michael Katsidis and Juan Diaz who holds both the WBO and WBA belts.

“I’d love to see the Diaz’s fight each other,” said Henry Ramirez, a Riverside boxing trainer. “Julio can really crack and he’s very skilled.”

Right now the lightweight divisions including junior lightweight, lightweight and super lightweight are burgeoning with talent across the country. California is enjoying one of its best years in terms of top quality fighters in the lightweight divisions.

To assess the talent we enlisted the help of a few expert boxing people who know the business and make decisions for some of the best fighters in the world. Those assisting with this piece are Brad Goodman, Rudy Hernandez, Robert Garcia, Henry Ramirez, and Ben Lira.

Here are the other junior lightweights (130 pounds), lightweights and super lightweights (140 pounds) ready for their moments in the limelight. Beginning with the four-round and six-round fighters:

Ron Hurley (1-1-1) of San Jacinto – The lanky 130-pounder already has a loss and a draw, but he’s been matched tough in Nevada. He has excellent fighting skills for an 18-year-old. If Hurley can avoid taking too many punches he could evolve into a good fighter. He’s tall for his weight at 5-feet nine-inches. He’s fighting on June 15 at Harrah’s Rincon.

Carlos Molina (1-0) of Commerce – He made his debut at Ontario and showed classy moves and countermoves in winning by unanimous decision. Though he’s not very tall, his skill level

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makes him dangerous for anyone. He's still a teenager but has captured numerous national titles as an amateur.

Hector Serrano (3-0, 2 KOs) of Huntington Park – The 18-year-old moved to Riverside to begin his apprenticeship under Henry Ramirez. Tall for a lightweight, Serrano has raised interest quickly with his performances. Serrano is a stablemate of Josesito Lopez and heavyweight Chris Arreola.

John Molina (6-0, 5 KOs) of Covina – Though he's already 24 he's still very fresh in the boxing world. Molina is a good athlete with power in the right or left hand. "He's the type of fighter who could be losing a fight and end it with a knockout," said Goodman. "We need to see how he reacts when he faces someone who wants it as much as he does."

He'll be fighting at the Quiet Cannon on June 22.

Miguel Garcia (8-0, 7 KOs) of Oxnard – He comes from a boxing family and is co-trained by his brother Robert Garcia a former world champion and Eduardo Garcia his father. They've passed on their knowledge to the youngest Garcia who's sparred many rounds with Manny Pacquiao and his brother Bobby. Though Manny and Bobby took it easy on the youngster, that's valuable experience in the ring.

The prospects

Brandon Rios (15-0, 10 KOs) of Oxnard – He's originally from Kansas but now resides and trains at La Colonia Boxing Club. Big and tough he recently helped Marco Antonio Barrera prepare for his epic battle last March. Rios has height, power and decent speed. "He's still trying to find himself," said Goodman.

Dominic Salcido (12-0, 6 KOs) of Rialto – After a couple of years of inactivity Salcido has now been moving at a rapid pace toward contention. For years many boxing experts tabbed Salcido as a "can't miss" prospect though he seldom fought. Now he's in a fast gear.

"Dominic Salcido has fast hands and fast legs," said Robert Garcia. "He's got a lot of talent, he just needs to plant his feet a little more and take some chances for the knockouts to come."

Josesito Lopez (20-2, 12 KOs) of Riverside – In his first pro bout he knocked out an amateur star making his second appearance. In his third bout he suffered his first loss. Since then he's embarked on a learning curve that has propelled him to become one of the most improved lightweights. "He's a good prospect who can punch," said Goodman. "I just wish he'd use his height more and jab."

Vicente Escobedo (13-1, 11 KOs) of Pasadena – Many compared him to Oscar De La Hoya when he arrived from the Olympics. But a loss to veteran Daniel Reyes seemed to set him back. Now master boxing trainer Nacho Beristain is guiding the 25-year-old boxer-puncher. "It's not a bad thing to have a loss early in a career," said Rudy Hernandez who trains two lightweight contenders. "Vicente is a very good fighter. He's only going to get better with Nacho Beristain

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teaching him.”

The Contenders

Tim “Desert Storm” Bradley (20-0, 11 KOs) of Indio – Just recently Bradley rolled through another super lightweight contender on national television. The speedy Bradley uses his quickness and power to gain advantage on the inside. He also has quick legs to get out of trouble. “He’s already been matched up tough,” said Hernandez. “Bradley has been tested. I think he’s going to win a world title.”

Victor Ortiz (17-1-1, 12 KOs) of Oxnard – The super lightweight fights from a left-handed stance and has caught a lot of attention with his riveting knockouts. His loss and draw were due to a disqualification and an accidental cut on his head. Otherwise Ortiz, 20, would be undefeated. “He’s such a nice kid out of the ring,” said Goodman. “No doubt in my mind he’s destined to win a world title.”

Urbano Antillon (18-0, 11 KOs) of Maywood – Despite only 18 pro fights Antillon has proven himself against stellar competition. Injuries and other problems put him out of action. Now he’s ready to take a shot at the world title. He’s currently ranked number one by the WBC. “Urbano Antillon is a great fighter but not too much TV exposure,” said Henry Ramirez. “He’s a sharpshooter with good clean punches. He’s just so accurate with his punches.”

Goodman, who has worked with Top Rank for years, said Antillon should be the next world champion from this list of lightweights.

“He’s really onto something big,” said Goodman. “I’m pretty sure he’ll surpass everybody plus he has a great trainer.”