

## Andre Berto, Thoroughbred Boxer

Written by Robert Mladinich  
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Undefeated welterweight sensation Andre Berto's quest for a world title steamrolls ahead on July 27, when he headlines ESPN 2's Friday Night Fights against the durable veteran Cosme Rivera of Mexico at the Saratoga Springs City Center in upstate New York.

The show is being co-promoted by Pugnacious Promotions and DiBella Entertainment.

Because Saratoga is known as a summer horse racing Mecca, it seems an appropriate venue for the hard-punching, 23-year-old Berto, 18-0 (16 KOs), to showcase his formidable skills. The card is being held on the eve of the Breeder's Cup qualifier Whitney Stakes.

Chances are that the 31-year-old Rivera, 30-10-2 (21 KOs), who has tangled with the likes of Zab Judah, Diobelys Hurtado, Joel Julio and Golden Johnson, will provide more than just obligatory resistance but will eventually succumb to Berto's vaunted power.

Team Berto already has a September 29 date with David Estrada, 20-3 (11 KOs), on the HBO televised undercard of the highly anticipated Jermain Taylor-Kelly Pavlik middleweight title clash.

"Andre Berto is going to bring his boxing horsepower to Saratoga," said his promoter, Lou DiBella. "He is boxing's thoroughbred. It is a great opportunity to perform in front of many avid sports fans assembled at Saratoga for the historic racing meet."

And Berto seems genuinely excited about fighting on ESPN 2, even though he has already been showcased on HBO several times. The thickly muscled, extremely disciplined and incredibly powerful Berto is as old school as it gets when it comes to taking advantage of rich opportunities.

He is much too pure of a fighter to believe he is taking a step down by fighting on ESPN 2, even after having squared off on HBO.

"I am excited to be able to perform and showcase my talent in front of a broad national audience on ESPN 2," said Berto, who many insiders consider the premier prospect in the sport.

"Saratoga is going to be fun because it is a city known for running the best thoroughbreds in the world. I hope to bring the same kind of excitement into the ring."

Even though he has stopped all but two of his opponents, seven in the first round, all of Berto's fights are exciting for as long as they last. Although a good boxer, he has a swarming, rampaging style that is reminiscent of a young Mike Tyson.

That was never more apparent than when he blasted out Norberto Bravo, who had displayed

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an abundance of grit and determination on season two of "The Contender" reality television series, in one brutal round in New York in February 2007.

In Berto's last fight he stopped journeyman Martinus Clay in seven rounds on the undercard of the Jermain Taylor-Cory Spinks title bout in Memphis in May.

"Andre represents the future," said his longtime cut man Danny Milano. "Everything he does in the ring is done with bad intentions. He doesn't punch at you, he punches through you. He has great focus and really knows how to win. You don't really get to see the measure of a fighter until he is seriously tested, but we haven't got that far yet. He's stopped everyone we put in his path. His power and relentlessness are frightening."

As ferocious as he is in the ring, Milano says that Berto, who is trained by Tony Morgan, is the picture of calm in the minutes - even seconds - leading up to his fights.

"In the dressing room, you'd never know he's getting ready to fight," marveled Milano. "He's joking around, napping or sitting calmly. But the second the bell rings he becomes a Little Tyson."

Raised in Winter Haven, Florida, Berto was groomed to be a fighter for as long as he can remember. His father was an ultimate fighter long before it was fashionable. His brother was a state champion wrestler, and his sister, says Berto, was, proportionately speaking, the hardest punching member of the family.

"Every time we got in trouble, we didn't get a timeout," said the amiable Berto. "We had to do 500 push-ups or 500 squats. There were no ifs, ands or butts. It was a tough household."

Berto says he didn't appreciate his father's tough love then, but now realizes it was all worthwhile. By his senior year in high school, he had traveled to more than 20 countries while representing national amateur teams. He was also considered a shoo-in to make the United States Olympic team in 2004.

Fate intervened at the Olympic Trials when Berto, who always seemed better suited for the pros than the amateurs, was disqualified for a foul.

However, because both of his parents were born in Haiti, Berto was able to utilize his dual citizenship to become that country's lone Olympic boxing representative in Athens. Surprisingly he came home without a medal, which diminished much of the intense pre-Olympic buzz that he had created.

Berto wound up turning professional with DiBella because, he says, DiBella "was the only one that stayed on the level with me."

From all appearances, it has been a boxing marriage made in heaven. "Andre is the best young prospect I've ever worked with," said DiBella. "He's a bull, very strong. The welterweight division is very rich right now, but Andre is going to be a problem for anyone at 147 pounds. I can't wait

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to see what this kid can do.”

In the co-feature, undefeated heavyweight prospect Chazz Witherspoon, 18-0 (12 KOs), a 2004 Olympic alternate and National Golden Gloves champion, faces Fernely Feliz, 29-8 (16 KOs), of Danbury, Connecticut. Feliz has faced championship caliber opponents Oleg Maskaev and John Ruiz.

Others on the show include junior middleweight Brandon Mitchem, 25- 4 (8 KOs); welterweight Tommy Rainone of Long Island, 7-0 (2 KOs); cruiserweight Chris Horn, 2-0 (1 KO); popular Irish light heavyweight Alo Kelly, who will be making his pro debut, and super bantamweight Paul Hyland, another native Irishman who is 8-0 (4 KOs).

Tickets, which range from \$40 to \$125, can be purchased by calling 518-312-2200.