WBC lightweight champion David Diaz of Chicago has toiled in relative anonymity since turning professional in 1996, a few months after representing the United States at the Olympic Games in Atlanta.

The now 31-year-old Diaz, 32-1-1 (17 KOS), who has experienced no shortage of setbacks during his professional career, won the title last August with a thrilling come-from-behind tenth round TKO over Jose Armando Santa Cruz in Las Vegas.

On Saturday, August 4, he will defend the title for the first time against the immensely popular three division world champion Erik “El Terrible” Morales, 48-5 (34 KOS), of Tijuana, Mexico, at the Allstate Arena in Rosemont, Illinois, which is a stone’s throw from the Windy City, where Diaz was raised and still lives.

Even though the 30-year-old Morales has lost four of his last five fights, to Zahir Raheem, Marco Antonio Barrera and Manny Pacquiao (twice), this is his first foray into the lightweight division.

Because Morales, who has been an HBO staple for the better part of a decade, is such a proven pay-per-view commodity, the fight is being billed as the “War for 4,” in deference to his quest to win a fourth world title.

The card, which is being promoted by Top Rank Inc. and Dominic Pesoli’s 8 Count Productions, will be televised on HBO Pay-Per-View.

It will also feature highly regarded Puerto Rican super bantamweight prospect Juan Manuel Lopez, 18-0 (16 KOS), against Hugo Dianzo, 31-11-1 (15 KOS), of Mexico City; and undefeated junior welterweight Julio Cesar Chavez Jr., 32-0-1 (25 KOS), will take on “Downtown” Louis Brown, 15-2 (10 KOS), of Indianapolis.

Even though this is a showcase of sorts for local favorite Diaz, common sense dictates that the buzz for the fight must be built around Morales, who is as popular as they come among Mexican fans.

He was born and bred in Mexico, while Diaz, who is of Mexican heritage, was born in the United States. Moreover, Chicago has a very large Mexican population who will undoubtedly turn out in droves for this fight.

There are also scores of Puerto Ricans living in Chicago, all of whom are crazy about the red-hot Marquez.

Diaz is a very congenial, down-to-earth fellow who is no stranger to upsetting the odds.

He beat the heavily favored Zab Judah at the Olympic Trials, but was defeated at the Games by Oktay Urkal, who as a professional has lost to Miguel Cotto, Kostya Tszyu and Vivian Harris.

Although Diaz returned home without a medal, he still had high hopes for a prosperous pro career.

Much to his chagrin, however, his career went nowhere fast, even as Olympic teammates David Reid, Antonio Tarver, Floyd Mayweather Jr., Fernando Vargas and Eric Morel won world titles.

Besides incurring numerous injuries, Diaz often had to work construction jobs to augment his boxing income. There were periods where he didn't fight for months, sometimes years. More than once, he thought about packing it in.

As committed a family man as you will ever meet, Diaz, the youngest of eight children, was devastated by the loss of a brother to AIDS, as well as by the excruciatingly long wait his mother had to endure for a kidney transplant.

First and foremost, says Diaz, comes his family. They are, without question, the number one priority in his life.

While talking about his brother, his normally upbeat mood turns solemn. "He was the real pride and joy of the family," said Diaz. "He was the first to graduate from college and he taught regional folklore dancing in Mexico, which is where my family is [originally] from."

Morales also draws great strength from his family. Even though he and Diaz share that trait, Morales still has every intention of derailing Diaz's suddenly sizzling career. He insists that he feels very comfortable at 135 pounds, and that the strain he put on his body to make 130 pounds was what was really responsible for his recent losses to high-profile opponents.

"I am going to fight like I always fight, and I don't expect any problems in the ring," said a supremely confident Morales. "You're going to see a great fight, and I really think I can win. Come Saturday, there will be a new champion."

"The time for talk is over," countered a seemingly relaxed Diaz. Then, referring to other local fighters on the card, he said, "We're going to remain champions for a long time."

The promoters have spared no expense in hyping this fight throughout the week. There were public workouts and a jog through beautiful Grant Park where the public was invited to join the fighters.

The public was even invited to join Lopez as he received a haircut at Luquillo's Barber Shop in the city's Humboldt Park section. Afterwards he greeted his throngs of fans, spread goodwill and signed autographs. The subject listed on the media alert read OPEN HAIRCUT.

Regardless of what happens in the Diaz-Morales fight, you can rest assured that Diaz's head will not swell if he wins. Nor will he hang it in shame if he loses.

“I know to keep my feet on the ground and always remember what’s most important,” he said.

A self-described homebody, he continually reiterates that nothing in the world is more important to him than his family. The love he has for them, just like the love they have for him, will never wane regardless of whether he is a champion or not.

“When all is said and done, money and fame, and people wanting to be with you means nothing without family,” he once said. “They are the people that are always there for you. Having lost a brother, I cherish my family more than I ever did.”

Morales would be foolish to mistake Diaz’s kindness and humility for weakness. “We’ve always known that David could fight,” said Top Rank matchmaker Bruce Trampler, who believed in Diaz from the get-go. “He’s had his share of ups and downs, but make no mistake about it: he’s a fighter.”