

Chris Arreola: The Rare Mexican Heavy

Written by David A. Avila

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Mexican-American heavyweight Chris “The Nightmare” Arreola hopes to venture where few others have reached in winning a heavyweight title.

Arreola, an undefeated heavyweight from Riverside, California, faces Chicago’s Thomas Hayes (26-1, 18 KOs) on Friday for the vacant WBC Continental Americas title at the Doubletree Hotel in Ontario. The fight will be televised by Telefutura and is co-promoted by Goossen-Tutor and Thompson Boxing Promotions.

It’s an early fight card that begins at 4 p.m.

Forget about the heavyweight world title, no Mexican-American heavyweight has captured any national heavyweight title in more than 100 years of professional prizefighting.

Heavyweights of Mexican heritage have entered the ring but most have fallen through the cracks or received cracks from bigger opponents. Few Mexican heavyweights exist simply because of size impediments.

Back in the 1960s there was Manuel Ramos, a six-feet, four-inch heavyweight who fought Joe Frazier after amassing a solid record that included wins over Ernie Terrell and Eddie Machen. After staggering Frazier in the first round, Smoking Joe blew him out in the second. Ramos never seemed the same after that loss but the late Ramos is considered Mexico’s greatest heavyweight.

There was also Joey Orbillo who was undefeated in 1966 when he faced another undefeated heavyweight by the name of “Irish” Jerry Quarry at the Olympic Auditorium. After 10 rounds of battering Orbillo, though favored in some circles, was no longer unbeaten and Quarry went on to greater glory. Orbillo sunk to oblivion.

During the late 80s and early 1990s another heavyweight of Mexican heritage emerged named Alex Garcia. He was trained by Ben Lira and was on his way to a huge match against the come-backing George Foreman. Garcia had dispatched Mike Williams and former cruiserweight world champion Ossie Ocasio who was now fighting as a heavyweight in eight rounds. He also beat Jerry Jones for the vacant NABF and WBC Continental Americas heavyweight title. The stage was set for Foreman and Garcia but the Californian wanted one more payday against the advice of his manager and trainer. He was knocked out by Mike Dixon in two rounds at the Riviera Hotel in Las Vegas in 1993 and down the drain went the Foreman match.

“I’ll never forget that day,” said Lira, who trains fighters in South El Monte, California.

Ironically, Arreola is fighting for the vacant WBC Continental Americas heavyweight title when he faces Hayes in Ontario, California. The pressure is on for the Mexican heavyweight to step foot where few others have stepped.

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"I see this as my homecoming," says Arreola (21-0, 19 KOs), 26, who fought four of his first six pro bouts at the Doubletree Hotel. "I call Riverside my home."

Though Arreola and his trainer Henry Ramirez combined have less than 60 years in age, the tandem has them headed like a bullet toward heavyweight contention.

Both fighter and trainer are good friends and often attend the same recreational events. Inside the ring they're all business and seemingly unconcerned with the monetary prospects of becoming a heavyweight contender.

"They're sitting on a gold mine," says boxing scout Brad Goodman of Arreola attempting to become one of the few heavyweight contenders of Mexican heritage. "Chris Arreola has a lot of ability, it's just up to his dedication on how far he goes."

There has never been a heavyweight world champion of Mexican descent though dozens of Mexican prizefighters have earned world titles. Just not at heavyweight.

It's a question both fighter and trainer hear more often from newspaper reporters and television journalists who realize that the Riverside heavyweight is treading on rare ground.

Even boxing insiders are noticing with a few trying to persuade Arreola to leave his young trainer. But Arreola continues to rely on his 31-year-old teacher to develop the skills to compete at the elite level.

"We started working on a lot of things to make him a better fighter," said Ramirez, who also trains lightweight contender Josesito Lopez and three other fighters.

Their pairing happened several years ago over some drinks at a nightclub. Arreola suddenly told Ramirez that he wanted him as a trainer.

"We were out drinking when Chris told me he wanted me to become his trainer," said Ramirez. "I told him he was drunk and to tell me when he's sober."

The next day a sober Arreola repeated to Ramirez to train him.

"I had other trainers but they didn't fit my style. I'm a banger," said Arreola remembering that day. "Henry was always giving guys confidence and I liked that."

It hasn't entirely been a smooth road.

Arreola, an intelligent person in and out of the ring, sometimes walks his own path regardless of advice. He had knocked out silly 11 consecutive opponents so why change?

Then he ran into veteran heavyweight Andrew Greeley who took every shot and fired back. He forced the young heavyweight Arreola to fight the entire scheduled six rounds. That had never happened before.

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After that fight, Ramirez and Arreola worked harder on defensive tactics and offensive variety. It's worked so far.

"They told me I wasn't going anywhere with Henry training me," Arreola said.

The next fight Arreola was matched against the rugged Domonic Jenkins who was just coming off an upset over another former undefeated prospect named Malcolm Tann.

"That was a tough fight," Ramirez remembers of the fight that took place at Pechanga Resort and Casino.

Jenkins ripped uppercuts against Arreola and used a jab to keep the Riverside fighter off-balance. After four rounds Jenkins was winning the fight handily, but Ramirez spotted some flaws and in the fifth round Arreola out-gutted Jenkins and proceeded with a vicious body and head attack that resulted in a fifth-round technical knockout victory.

"Chris proved he could take a punch that night. He ate a lot of punches from Jenkins," said Ramirez.

Las Vegas

In Hollywood, another heavyweight prospect named Damian "Bolo" Wills was rising up the rankings just like Arreola. Both fighters had the same height and weight and seemed destined for a showdown. On Nov. 4, 2006, in Las Vegas, the California rivals finally met.

Both Wills and Arreola had wanted the fight and were happy it was being televised. A new slimmer Arreola emerged in Las Vegas and out-hustled Wills with his speed and stamina. That night he sent a message to the other heavyweights that a new California heavyweight was on the national scene.

"That fight showed that when Arreola is a focused fighter he's a real dominator," says Goodman who attended the fight. "It also showed that Henry Ramirez has done a great job too."

Al Haymon, who manages Arreola and a number of elite fighters such as Floyd Mayweather Jr., Vernon Forrest and Paul Williams, has also proved to be an important weapon for the Riverside fighter in gaining televised fights.

"Where would we be without Al Haymon," says Ramirez.

For the fourth consecutive fight Arreola 's fight will be televised and the pressure is mounting for the Riverside fighter to become the first heavyweight world champion of Mexican blood.

"Quite honestly there's no extra pressure," said Arreola, adding that his training under Ramirez continues as usual. "It's pretty cool. It's a journey for both of us but we're not big-headed."

One more thing, Andrew Greeley, who proved to be the first fighter to withstand Arreola's

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punching power in the ring and go the distance, worked with the Riverside fighter to prepare him for a tough fight.

“He’s a good guy,” Ramirez said. “We needed somebody tough like Greeley.”

Bernardo Osuna, the boxing television announcer for Telefutura, said Arreola’s journey is indeed a seldom-traveled road.

“He would really be a phenomenon if he wins the world title,” said Osuna who will be covering the fight on the air. “No Mexican has ever made it.”