CARSON, Calif.-With one step needed to grab the mega-fight showdown against Julio Cesar Chavez Jr. Alfonso Gomez clubbed past rock jaw Ben Tackie, but Sergio Mora stumbled against Elvin Ayala for a split-decision draw on Tuesday and now the outlook for a showdown with Kelly Pavlik looks clouded.

Both Gomez and Mora had to win.

Gomez (18-3-2) proved he was ready for bigger fights with a 10-round punch fest over boxing's best punch taker Ben Tackie (29-8-1) in a 10-round welterweight contest. The fight was televised by ESPN.

With a possible fight against Mexico's undefeated waiting in the wings, Gomez used every round to prove he could out-punch Ghana's Tackie and exchanged punches that made the audience wince. But he emerged with the victory according to the judges 98-92 twice and 97-93.

"We worked on a lot of jabs and lateral movement for this fight," said Gomez, perhaps the most popular of all the participants of the Contender television reality show. "I respect Tackie because he comes to fight and he doesn't duck anybody. I don't duck anybody too."

Gomez now has a bead on Mexico's favorite son, but the Whittier-based fighter now must wait for Chavez's outcome against Rey Chavez in December.

"It's not an easy fight," said Gary Gittlesohn, who manages Gomez. "We've had talks with Bob Arum and he's been receptive to this fight."

Gittlesohn also said that HBO approves the fight for late March if Chavez wins his fight.

Gomez is anxious for the showdown.

"I don't think Julio Cesar Chavez has been in those deep waters," Gomez said. "But he has more knockouts than I have fights."

But in the co-main event, an upset took place in the middleweight contest between Mora and little-known Elvin Ayala.

After a long 14 month-layoff, Sergio "The Latin Snake" Mora (19-0-1) hoped to get back in the middleweight loop against Ayala but was derailed by the tall counter-puncher and suffered a split-decision draw.

"A draw is like a win for me," said Ayala (18-2-1, 8 KOs).

Mora, the champion of season one the Contender reality TV show, had possible plans to fight for the middleweight championship. The East Los Angeles boxer needed to get back in the ring.

But after a slow start, even Mora's rally in the latter rounds proved insufficient. The judges scored it 99-91 for Mora, 96-94 for Ayala and 95-95 for a draw.

"I'm very, very sorry. That was an embarrassment," said Mora, 26, following the draw. "That was not me."

Plans didn't go well for Mora who hoped to face new middleweight king Kelly Pavlik in February. Last month Mora was supposed to face former junior middleweight champion Kassim Ouma but the entire fight card was scrapped because of an injury to one of the fighters in the main event. So he took this fight to keep busy.

From the beginning Mora looked rusty.

Ayala began quickly with a two-fisted attack that seemed to catch Mora by surprise in the first round. But after two minutes, it seemed Mora had figured out Ayala's style.

A solid right hand by Ayala caught Mora flush at the opening of the second round. That was followed by a low blow by Mora forcing a pause. Then three left hooks by Mora were followed by a straight right hand counter. That seemed to spell the theme of the battle between the two middleweights.

After a minute of inactivity and feints, a strong right to the body by Mora opened the scoring in the fifth round. A three-punch combo by Mora forced Ayala's trainer Luis Rosa to scream, "keep your hands up." Another right to the body landed hard for Mora to end the round but Ayala seemed unfazed.

"This is our fight, he's tired," Rosa said.

A double left hook opened the sixth round for Mora but a strong right and left combination landed solid for Ayala and let Mora know he still had power in his punches. A left uppercut pierced Mora's guard and sent sweat flying. Ayala seemed to have more energy, as Mora seemed physically spent.

"I hurt Mora with a body shot," said Ayala. "I know I hurt him because when I hit him he didn't punch back."

The seventh round saw Mora rebound with more effective punching, but Ayala never seemed to lose confidence.

"I was having fun," Ayala said.

A left to the body and left to the head seemed to hurt Ayala but he fired back. A left hook caught Ayala on the jaw but he retaliated with a quick right. It was a close round that could have gone

to either fighter.

It looked like the East Los Angeles boxer found a second wind.

Mora started to close the distance and dig inside with body shots. A left uppercut snapped Ayala's head but he returned fire once again with that sneaky right hand counter. A left to the body seemed to stun Ayala too. But he recovered quickly to move out of the way. A cut above Mora's left eye angered the boxer who yelled something and snapped his gloves together. But he just couldn't land the telling blow.

"I felt I landed the harder shots," said Mora.

The final round saw Mora punch and slip and land solid shots to the body, but Ayala answered back in the second minute of the 10th round with his own combinations. The two fought furiously during the final 30 seconds with Mora trying to land the knockout punch and Ayala looking for the knockout counter. But neither fighter could find the other's chin.

"Getting a draw in his hometown is like getting a win," said Ayala.

Jeff Wald, Contender promoter, said he hopes the draw doesn't deter a possible title fight against new middleweight champion Pavlik.

"He fought his guts out, he never backed up," Wald said.

Other bouts

Freddy Curiel (18-6-2, 8 KOs) stopped big punching Fontaine Cabell (22-8-2, 17 KOs) at 2:37 of the fourth round. A straight right hand dropped Cabell. Though he beat the count, Curiel jumped on him and forced referee Raul Caiz Jr. to stop the fight.