

Abner Mares, Another Mexican Star-To-Be

Written by Ronan Keenan
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Sacrifices are a necessary element in the search for success. Yet even when the search is realized, the laborious efforts are never forgotten.

While living as a Mexican immigrant in the tough city of Hawaiian Gardens, Los Angeles, daily life for Ismael Mares was not easy. But after identifying the exceptional boxing ability of his teenage son, Ismael could see a brighter future ahead and decided he would do everything possible to maximize Abner's precocious talent.

When he turned fifteen, the youngster was taken from his familiar surroundings by his father and brought south of the boarder in an effort to make the Mexican Olympic team. To become a success Abner would be forced to bypass the typical life experiences of his schoolmates.

"I missed out on a lot of things," admits Abner, who was born in Guadalajara but moved to the US at age seven. "I didn't go to my senior prom or nothing like that. I wasn't hanging around with my friends. I thought my father was punishing me, sending me to a place where I didn't know anyone and where I was the new guy that everyone picked on."

The efforts bore fruit and Abner achieved an accomplished amateur career, representing Mexico at the 2004 Olympics and registering a amateur 112-8 record. His endeavours attracted the attention of Golden Boy Promotions, who signed the then 18-year-old bantamweight to a professional contract four years ago.

"It's amazing because [Abner's] story is almost like mine," said the company's president and Mares's idol, Oscar De La Hoya. "His father was a fighter, and my father was a fighter. Just to know that we have similarities, it starts everything off on the right foot."

But it takes more than familial parallels to reach De La Hoya's level of professional stardom. Mares was aiming to boost his profile on Saturday when he fought Diosdado Gabi in front of a large media presence on the Manny Pacquiao-Juan Manuel Marquez undercard at the Mandalay Bay in Las Vegas.

Mares, now 22, entered the ring with a 15-0 (9) record and an already stellar status in his native Mexico. His amateur career included distinguished performances at both the Under-17 and Junior World Championships and expectations of a 2004 Olympic medal were so high that Mares was asked to appear in commercials for Coca-Cola.

But his medal ambitions were quashed when he was defeated in the opening stages by Hungary's Zsolt Bedak. Some onlookers felt Mares deserved the decision, but the fighter himself makes no excuses about his performance.

"Before the Olympics I just felt I could go in there and win," he says. "I just felt I was too good to train."

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That attitude seems to have been supplanted by a strong work ethic. Abner's memories of an arduous childhood now inspire him to feverously seize his opportunity for prosperity. Since linking up with renowned trainer Ignacio Beristain last year, Mares has shed four pounds from his fighting weight and now aims to make his mark as a bantamweight contender.

Losing a few pounds must seem effortless given his previous struggles to subsist.

"[Growing up] I used to sleep on the floor of [my family's] small apartment with my stomach hurting because I hadn't eaten all day," he recalls. "I'll remember those times forever. It makes me realize what I came from and who I am."

Fighting on a big Las Vegas show is not a new experience for Mares, who defeated Elvis Luciano Martinez on the July 2005 Bernard Hopkins-Jermain Taylor card at the MGM Grand. Mares made the most of his appearance under the bright lights with an aggressive display of power-punching to stop Martinez in the third round. The fight was one of the first of the evening and the 15,000 capacity venue was attended by a sparse crowd of a few hundred, but immediately after the fight a jubilant Abner jumped onto the ring post to salute a zealous group of fans seated in the cheapest seats at the back of the arena.

"That was my whole family," reveals Mares. "They come to my fights, and they loved the MGM Grand. They didn't know how big the place was."

With the aspiration of one day headlining a major event, Mares must learn his trade by battling a series of rugged opponents with various styles. Beristain, who has molded the techniques of Rafael and Juan Manuel Marquez, describes his charge as "a huge diamond that needs to be polished carefully."

His victory over the faded former flyweight titleholder Isidro Garcia last September saw Abner display a newfound patience while utilizing swift footwork to keep the 31-year-old at a distance. A series of sharp righthands resulted in acute swelling to Garcia's eye, forcing the veteran's corner to halt the contest at the end of the seventh round.

Then in his last outing before Saturday, Mares showed he could box for twelve fast-paced rounds when he outscored the durable Damian Marchiano. Mares landed an abundance of clean punches, but the Argentine absorbed the punishment and continually pressed the Mexican.

HBO commentator Larry Merchant said Marchiano reminded him of the granite-jawed Wayne McCullough, but the prevailing opinion was that Mares's previously vaunted power had been overrated.

Mares sought to dispel this notion against the Philippines' Gabi, but it figured to be a challenging task against the experienced southpaw.

Gabi is a 28-year-old who fights with an uncompromising style and began Saturday's fight with a 30-3-1 (21) slate. His highlights include an eight round stoppage loss against the

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then-unbeaten world titlist Vic Darchinyan in March 2006 and a surprising first round knockout win over the normally resilient Mauricio Pastrana five months later.

Gabi trains alongside Manny Pacquiao at Freddie Roach's Wild Card gym in LA and the noted trainer has spoken highly of Diosdado's improvement since his move to bantamweight two years ago. His last outing was an eight round decision victory over the seasoned Jose Angel Beranza, and boxing writer Graham Houston expected Gabi to provide a tough test for Mares, describing him as a "live underdog".

But Gabi's preparation was called into question when it was reported he was eight pounds over the bantamweight limit just one day before the weigh-in. A weary and drawn looking Gabi subsequently failed to make 118, exceeding the maximum by one and a half pounds. Conversely, Mares, who is three inches taller at 5'2", appeared relaxed and in perfect shape on Friday, weighing one pound under the limit.

On fight night Gabi climbed into the ring having gained a staggering sixteen pounds in little more than twenty-four hours. Evidently not in condition to compete for twelve rounds, he began the NABO title bout aggressively, while Mares was content to move from side to side, waiting for an opening.

With less than a minute remaining in the opening frame, Mares countered a Gabi hook, landing a sharp straight right than sent the Filipino staggering. Gabi survived the round, but Mares, sensing his opponent was in trouble, floored Diosdado with a quick one-two combination early in the second. Gabi rose, but a sustained follow-up attack of accurate flurries from Mares sent the Filipino reeling to the canvas, persuading referee Jay Nady to halt the contest after 49 seconds.

Few expected Mares to demolish Gabi in such quick fashion. But the victory is tainted by Gabi's weight-making struggle and fatigued effort. The Filipino looked sloppy from the outset, his muscles drained of vitality.

Even so, Abner can't be blamed for his foe's preparation.

"We expected a stronger fighter, but [Gabi] is experienced; he should know what to do," said Mares when asked about Gabi's weight issues.

Ultimately, the record books will make no reference to Gabi's pre-fight condition. The bout was intended as a showcase for a young prospect for whom big things are expected. And Abner lived up to his billing.

While the conclusive result boosts his résumé, Abner's pugilistic instincts were more impressive. He showed composure at the onset of what was forecast to be the toughest night of his career. He waited for his opportunity to strike, and then dispatched his bewildered opponent in a clinical manner.

It's no longer too soon to begin drawing comparisons with the brilliant Juan Manuel Marquez.

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And while Marquez missed out on victory last Saturday, his compatriot will one day get chance to make a mark on the big time.

Declared Mares, "Tonight's performance proves I belong at this level."

That shouldn't be forgotten.