Written by Ralph Gonzalez
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Very few fighters deliver pain like WBO Super Bantamweight Champion Daniel Ponce De Leon (34-1, 30 KOs). It's not just the intensity he punches with but also the way he delivers it. His punches usually fly out from odd angles like misshapen rocks fired from a badly calibrated sling-shot.

De Leon's style certainly isn't pretty but it's gotten the 27 year old a world title and 30 knockouts in 34 fights. Not bad for someone who was labeled as too raw and too unpolished to compete against the top 122 pounders. "My style isn't slick or fancy but it's effective," said the champion as he starts preparing for his June 7 HBO date against undefeated prospect Juan Manuel Lopez (21-0, 19 KOs). "I've seen him fight. He's a good boxer and a big puncher. He's considered Puerto Rico's next star. We'll see what he has."

Talk about a contrast in styles.

Lopez is a fancy dancing lefty who can pop, stick and move like a poor man's Mayweather. It's a style De Leon has yet to encounter. The closest resemblance is Celestino Caballero, who took De Leon's undefeated status. Caballero, the WBA champion, is a physical freak with a six foot frame and a seventy two inch reach. Compare that to De Leon's five foot five height and one can surmise how the Panamenian's physical attributes helped him garner the most credible win of his career.

Caballero used his considerable reach and height advantage to keep De Leon at bay and smartly rode his bicycle for most of the fight for a unanimous decision win. "I learned a lot from that loss," De Leon said. "He was very difficult. If I fought him again I'd fight him differently. Hopefully a rematch will materialize in the future. But right now my focus is on Juan Ma Lopez and handing him his first loss."

It wouldn't be the first time that De Leon dashed the dreams of a promising upstart. The much heralded Filipino prospect Rey Bautista tasted his first defeat at the hands of De Leon as he was clipped with a right, left combination that sent him to the canvas and had him staggering like he overdosed on Tequila shots. The first round knockout surprised many of his biggest critics. "There was some criticism of me after the Penalosa fight. Some people felt it was too close for comfort," De Leon said. "Even though I felt I beat him easy, I had to make a statement against Bautista."

Although the scorecards for his fight against Penalosa in March of 2007 indicate that the Mexican had an easy time with the sly Filipino veteran, some have gone as far as calling the decision controversial. The champion dismisses such claims. "I threw over 1400 punches against Penalosa. I don't know why there would be any criticism," De Leon said. "Look at the judge's cards. One judge didn't give him a single round. People can have their opinion but there's no way I even came close to losing to Penalosa."

De Leon contends he wouldn't think twice about giving him a rematch in his homeland. "I'd be more than happy to travel to the Phillipines to fight Penalosa in front of his countrymen," De Leon said. "Why not? Chingazos (punches) are chingazos no matter where we throw them."

The father of three realizes that he's got a major hurdle to clear in Lopez if he's to face the elite fighters in his division. "I have to win. This is my most important fight to date," De Leon said. "All the other fights have been tests and I've passed them. This is the one that I hope will lead to fighting people like Israel Vazquez and Rafael Marquez. That's the goal."

De Leon is of Tarahumara descent and often visits the Sierras of Chihuahua, Mexico where the tribe resides. The indigenous group is world re-known for its long distance runners. "I was there during Christmas. We went to see the Tarahumaras and brought them some blankets and toys and stuff like that," De Leon said. "I did a lot of walking through the sierras. I like to walk the mountains and reflect. It's a peaceful place."

Quite a change from Los Angeles, California where De Leon makes his permanent home. He's aware that ultimately, no matter where he is, the wrong choices are always present. "The temptations seem to be everywhere. It's the hardest part about boxing," De Leon said. "When it comes to our sport there are always people around wanting you to have a drink with them. There are drugs and women out there. Wherever you go there's always someone trying to push you into something."

It's strict discipline and personal motivation that keeps the Golden Boy Promotions fighter focused. "I think about my kids and about their future," De Leon said. "They're the reason I run and train for hours. It's their future I'm fighting for."

De Leon plans to rough up and give Juan Ma his first setback. "I'm going to maintain my title. I know I'm going to win. I'll be prepared to go toe to toe for 12 rounds against Juan Ma," De Leon said. "And if he decides to run, I'm going to go searching for him. I'm going in there to win for my family and country. Like a good Mexican, I'm holding nothing back."

For more on Daniel Ponce De Leon: www.goldenboypromotions.com

*photo courtesy Rob DeLorenzo