

BORGES: Oscar Beat Mayweather Lite, But...

Written by Ron Borges
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The troubling thing about Oscar De La Hoya's one-sided sparring session with Steve Forbes Saturday night was not that he came out of it with a swollen and aching left hand. The troubling thing was that he came out of it with an alarming amount of swelling around both eyes in a fight in which one judge awarded him every round and the other two gave him 11 of the 12.

Steve Forbes, unlike his scheduled September 20 opponent Floyd Mayweather, Jr., not only floats like a butterfly he punches like one too. Not only is he not heavy handed he doesn't even come with the kind of stinging jab that can cause an opponent's face to swell like it's been attacked by a swarm of bees.

Yet there was De La Hoya after having pleased a partisan crowd of 27,000 at the Home Depot Center just south of Los Angeles standing in the ring an hour after the fight talking to the media with two cheeks that looked like they'd been scalded by the sun and a right eye that was puffier than the left even though it was the latter that first began to swell early in the fight.

None of that takes away from the perfect use he made of his left jab, the weapon of choice if he is to again be competitive against Mayweather in the fall. Forbes described it as "a piston" and he should know because it sliced a cut along the side of his right eye midway through the fight and bruised up his face enough that he, unlike De La Hoya, came to the post-fight session wearing dark glasses to hide the damage done to him from the harsh light of the moon shining above the outdoor soccer facility where he'd just been a well-paid sparring partner for nearly an hour.

De La Hoya admitted he'd stopped doubling and tripling his jab after the fifth round because his left hand began to ache, shifting over to more of a single shot power jab that stunned Forbes on several occasions and controlled his ability to launch much of an attack. That is the same jab that allowed De La Hoya to win the early rounds against Mayweather before De La Hoya abandoned it and lost a split decision to him a year ago. It's the same jab he will have to have working at full capacity in September if he is to reverse that score and find a way to improve on that performance when they meet again.

Perhaps because of that De La Hoya quickly reassured his questioners that he did not believe the hand injury was serious, although he said his already planned week off from training for Mayweather following the Forbes fight would be spent with his hand in a bucket of ice cubes.

"In the fourth round I hit him on top of the head," De La Hoya said of a hand that was later examined at White Memorial Medical Center in East Los Angeles and found to be sore but without further damage. "I was a bit hesitant (to throw the jab after that). I knew I had to throw it solid, straight at him, or he'd keep coming. I had to bite down and do it."

The larger concern is not with his left hand however. It is with the puffiness Forbes was able to raise around De La Hoya's 35-year-old eyes despite landing few telling punches all night. That

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is not to say he didn't land at all because he did, especially during several fast flurries when he felt himself slipping into trouble as De La Hoya teed off on him to the head and body. But Forbes' punches should not have done the kind of damage that appeared on De La Hoya's face, which may well be an alarming warning that the first signs of age appeared on an otherwise brilliant night for De La Hoya only 15 miles from the East L.A. barrio where he grew up dreaming of being a world champion but never dreaming his life would become what it has.

The six-time world champion is not only the most powerful financial force in boxing he also heads up a sprawling business empire that includes real estate, publishing, an office building in downtown L.A., a charter school being built with his funding, a Grammy nominated CD, a soon-to-be best-selling autobiography that comes out next month and partial ownership of the Houston Dynamo of the Major League Soccer.

Have we missed anything? Well, he still can fight in a way that has produced more pay-per-view money than anyone in history, including Mike Tyson and Evander Holyfield, too. But can he still fight well enough to stand up to someone with Mayweather's gifts, gifts which have made him the best pound-for-pound fighter in the world?

That question will soon be answered and De La Hoya certainly sounded like someone who believes he can and he will but what else was he supposed to say after slapping Mayweather Lite around all night?

"I'll get the tape and study it," De La Hoya said. "I'll definitely be popping my jab. (I'll need to throw) more jabs. Be on my toes more and moving my head more. Stiff hard jabs and working the body will be the key."

That and moving his head and staying less straight up than he was against Forbes, who had little ammunition to stop De La Hoya's jab from tormenting him. All Forbes could do was back up, something Mayweather will do less of. Instead Mayweatehr will stay inside, slip many more of those jabs than Forbes did and create both a faster pace and a more uncomfortable one for De La Hoya.

Yet it all sounded good, as it always does when Oscar speaks. From his words to the way he was still on his toes and moving late in the fight to the success of his jab to the fact that this time he took a tune up fight before facing Mayweather, who he last fought following an unwise layoff of 364 days. Yet as De La Hoya spoke the redness of his cheeks and the swelling around both eyes seemed to be whispering that there may be more danger up there in the ring these days than it appeared. Danger as much from the eroding ravages of time as from Mayweather.

Time which robs a man of the slight edge he once had in reaction and reflexes. Time which steals the ability to move your head as you once did, move it to allow a blow to slide by you while you're still in position to punch instead of nicking your face and puffing your eyes. Time which will convince you to throw fewer flurries and when you do ones that are shorter in duration and thus less dangerous to an opponent like Mayweather.

"Early in the fight I felt the rust," De La Hoya argued. "I knew it would be a tough fight but you

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use it to take that rust out. By the 11th round I could feel the rust just falling away. I wanted to work on some things. I wanted to get on my toes and challenge my conditioning. I'm confident now I'll fight 12 hard rounds."

He very well might be but De La Hoya has been a part time fighter for the past eight years and he knows it. He has not fought three times in a year since 1999 and has fought only once a year (or less when he did not fight at all in 2005) since 2004. He is barely a .500 fighter since that time, going 7-5 leading up to the Forbes match. Now admittedly every loss but the one to Bernard Hopkins was close enough to be disputed and on several occasions he seemed to get the short end of the stick from judges in Las Vegas but still it is what it is. Combine that with the tell-tale puffiness around his eyes and you wonder what kind of dress rehearsal for September the Forbes fight really was? Was it a coming out party or a farewell party?

"This is the beginning of preparation to fight my son," insisted De La Hoya's trainer and Floyd Mayweather's father, Floyd, Sr. "I thought Oscar would have more power than he had. Now we know we have to work on that more but I thought it went well. He didn't do as much as I wanted but he did a good job.

"Floyd is a better fighter than Stevie but he doesn't throw as many punches as Steve so if Oscar feints well, uses his jab a lot and counter punches he'll have a great fight."

You could argue that while it will take that to beat Mayweather, De La Hoya only lost his 154-pound title to him by one point on one judge's card last September. Change that and it's a draw and who knows what would have happened next? But that isn't what happened and when you looked at that puffiness and at De La Hoya's inability to wobble Forbes you had to wonder what comes next this time.

Oscar De La Hoya was not wondering however. He was saying how much he was looking forward to September and promising he'd quickly be back in training for it.

"The first fight, believe me, I wanted to beat him," De La Hoya said of Mayweather. "There was a lot of hype, a lot of new strategies being implemented when it comes to marketing to make it the biggest event ever. You do get caught up in that.

"Now that I've been through that situation it's all business. This is personal. I'm going to beat him. You watch. I'm going to beat him.

"It's about having the perfect game plan. I can't go in there and be all stiff and ah, ah, ah! It doesn't work. The harder you try the better it is for Floyd. You gotta go in there and be on your toes. Take your time. Pick your shots. Pop, pop, pop. We'll get it done."

The Salesman smiled at the thought of The Plan as he bounced on his toes behind the podium, flicking a jab and then adjusting his soft, expensive leather jacket. The smile made his right eye all but disappear behind the swelling around it. It was hard to see The Plan quite so clearly after that, even for boxing's Golden Boy.