

TSS Future Star Sighting: Yuriorkis Gamboa

Written by Ron Borges
Tuesday, 13 May 2008 19:00

Boxing is the sport of false hope and broken dreams. It is sport's most demanding landscape, a place where the athlete not only fights alone but often trains himself in the same solitary way. That is what makes success so rare and greatness so difficult to attain.

There is no team structure to monitor and modify the kind of behavior that can throw cold water on a hot prospect. There is the trainer, of course, but there are so many influences outside his sphere of influence it is nearly impossible for him alone to keep a young prize fighter on track. That the fighter must do himself.

That is why it is always dangerous to look at a young boxer a year into his apprenticeship and project where he will be after another 12 months have passed, because many things can go wrong and everything has to go right for him to ever become a champion. The sad case of Panchito Bojado is one of the most recent examples of this, a potential champion derailed before he ever got on the train.

The rapid rise and quick retreat of Joel Julio, who had been anointed by many in boxing until Carlos Quintana spanked him, and he was life-and-death struggling to win a split decision from Cosme Rivera in his next outing, is another.

Such projections are fraught with danger, yet occasionally someone comes along who seems to have been born to fight. Someone who operates inside a boxing ring as if this is not a perilous endeavor but rather a special gift from a higher power. Yuriorkis Gamboa may be such a fighter.

Saturday night the young Cuban with the by-now-familiar defector's story will try for the 10th time to prove he is the exception. He will go out to show a new audience that he is the one for whom boxing will not prove to be an empty enterprise filled with disappointment but rather a hard road to glory. Certainly nothing he has done yet could lead to a different conclusion.

The 26-year-old 2004 Olympic gold medalist at flyweight was supposed to be one of Cuba's brightest hopes for another gold in Beijing this summer but he had other thoughts and acted upon them, defecting while training in Columbia in 2006 for the Pan-Am Games, along with teammates Yan Barthelemy and Odlanier Solis. They intended to go in tandem to the United States to launch professional careers in Miami despite having agreed to be promoted by an upstart German company, Arena-Box, but they were blocked by the Colombian government.

Held there for two weeks until visas to Germany cleared, the three Cuban fighters ended up making their professional debuts in Hamburg 13 months ago. It would be another six months before Gamboa first appeared in the U.S., stopping Adailton De Jesus 11 days after he'd done the same to Samuel Kebale, whose only previous loss had been a similar stoppage at the hands of former featherweight champion Scott Harrison.

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Kebede was down twice in the first round before Gamboa (9-0, 8 KOs) finished him and De Jesus faced a similar fate when he went down barely 30 seconds into Gamboa's American debut. Next to go was Gilbert Luque and a month later Johnnie Edwards was out on his feet in 94 seconds as Gamboa won the NABF super featherweight title in his debut on ESPN's Friday Night Fights in just his ninth professional fight.

Spectacular knockouts are nothing new early in a well-protected prospect's career and Gamboa now has eight straight going into Saturday night's Boxing After Dark main event against Darling Jimenez (23-2-2, 14 KO, including eight of his last nine). One can easily enough write such a spectacular start off to good matchmaking as easily as impressive fighting, but on the surface at least there seems less of the careful matchmaking and more of the belief that Gamboa has been kissed by the fistic gods with the gift of being able to hit someone in the kisser and disconnect their synapses with amazing alacrity. Including Jimenez, Gamboa's 10 opponents are a combined 169-31-8, and while that may not mean any of them were King Kong, the 5-5-inch kid from Guantanamo may prove to be before long.

As with most products of the Cuban fighting factory, Gamboa is a supremely confident boxer, arrogant to the point of seemingly never considering the possibility he too can be hurt in the ring. This comes in part from the crushing power in his overhand right and the speed with which his hands move but it also manifests itself in a dangerous habit of slinging his hands so low it creates natural defensive deficiencies which may yet take a toll on him.

Of course for that to be the case one of his opponents is going to have to stay conscious long enough to exploit it and thus far only Alexan Manvelyan managed to do that, in Gamboa's pro debut. He stayed conscious but, for the record, he had trouble staying on his feet himself in the final round.

Do any of these victories insure the future of Yuriorkis Gamboa? Certainly not. What they do is cry out for the larger boxing public to make note of him, however, for he is a power puncher in one of boxing's most competitive divisions, one that has most recently occupied the attention of Manny Pacquiao, Juan Manuel Marquez, Joan Guzman, Edwin Valero, Alex Arthur and Humberto Soto.

Gamboa is chasing all of them, a young pup nipping at the heels of far more proven performers. One day soon he will face one of them and only then will we know what he really is. But he is headlining an aptly named "Night of the Rising Stars" on HBO's Boxing After Dark series alongside super welterweight prospects James Kirkland (vs. Eromosele Albert) and Alfred Angulo (vs. Richard Gutierrez). This is supposed to be a night when the young stars shine, a night when Gamboa makes his debut on HBO a spectacular one.

That may not be as easy as Gamboa is used to because Jimenez is coming off a stunning stoppage of former junior lightweight champion Mike Anchondo 13 months ago. Jimenez (23-2, 14 KO) was given little chance, even though Anchondo was in the second fight of a comeback from a year layoff and nobody anticipated he would come in and overwhelm Anchondo.

The problem for Jimenez is he hasn't fought since, which doesn't mean he won't give Gamboa

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a challenge, although it complicates things against someone who so often starts as quickly as Gamboa does. Seldom has someone been more rightly nicknamed El Cicionde, the Cyclone.

How long that cyclone will roar through the junior lightweight division, it is too early to tell. But the winds are blowing and a lot of damage has already been left in the wake of its passing. If Yuriorkis Gamboa can continue to make that kind of noise, his real tests will come sooner than he thinks, and then we'll know. For now, it's enough for boxing fans to simply imagine what might yet be.

*photo courtesy ARENA Box-Promotions