

Ricky's Road: Lazcano, Paulie, Then Floyd (?)

Written by Ron Borges
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In case anyone disputes the tone of the song that cascaded throughout Las Vegas early last December, the numbers make the point louder than their words.

“There’s only ONE Ricky Hatton!!” the junior welterweight champion’s fans thundered again and again until the tune was embedded in the brain like a well-thought out jingle. In a sense the statement is true, and not even being knocked flat by Floyd Mayweather, Jr. in the 10th round of their Dec. 8 showdown has altered that reality.

There really is only one Ricky Hatton and only one guy like Ricky Hatton, who will pack a crowd in excess of 55,000 into City of Manchester Stadium, the home grounds of his beloved Manchester City soccer club, Saturday when he squares off against journeyman Juan Lazcano in Hatton’s first fight since his loss to Mayweather. While City of Manchester Stadium will always first and foremost be a soccer pitch, on that night it will become the place where Hatton makes clear that, in some parts of the world at least, one can still lose a fight without losing one’s popularity.

“At the Olympic (a famous Los Angeles fight venue where he was the matchmaker from 1964-1984) you had to be head and shoulders over everybody to be undefeated,” recalled 80-year-old promoter/matchmaker Don Chargin recently. “We worked to put guys in tough fights. Now if a guy loses a couple fights people write him off so you can’t do it that way.

“Look at (Prince) Hamed. He takes a licking from (Marco Antonio) Barrera and that’s it. Now we’ll have to see what happens with (Ricky) Hatton. He’s fortunate he has that backing in England where he can lose one fight to someone like Mayweather and come back and be just as popular. If a U.S. fighter gets flattened by Mayweather, you disappear. There’s just too much emphasis today on wins (in the U.S.).

“Look at those great, tough fighters like Tony Zale and Carmen Basilio. They all had a lot of losses because they were in so many competitive fights. They could lose and be headlining the next month. That’s all changed. If you were making matches like that today you’d be run out of business.”

Unless, apparently, you’re making them for Ricky Hatton. He has become a fistic phenomenon in the U.K., where he is clearly the most popular fighter in a country that has never lost its passion for the sport. Undefeated super middleweight and light heavyweight champion Joe Calzaghe packs 30,000 in to watch him overwhelm lightly-regarded American Peter Manfredo and Hatton counters by nearly doubling the number against a 33-year-old opponent who hasn’t fought in 18 months and when he last did he lost a close decision to former world champion Vivian Harris. The latter point would be impressive were it not for the fact that in Harris’ next fight he was stopped by Junior Witter in seven rounds. The same Junior Witter who was dethroned by untested Timothy Bradley two weeks ago.

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The fact is Hatton has connected with his fans in the same deep, cultural way that Oscar De La Hoya has connected with Latinos and Manny Pacquiao has reached Filipinos. When the latter fights, the entire country stops to watch. When Hatton came to America, over 20,000 Brits followed him, enough with tickets that they made the MGM Grand Garden Arena sound like Wembley Stadium. More importantly to Hatton, they set pay-per-view records in England that reportedly lifted Hatton's total gross earnings for the fight to \$40 million (20 million British pounds).

Look at those numbers and forget about anything else. There really IS only one Ricky Hatton and he's a boon for boxing for as long as he stays around.

There is much talk that the Lazcano fight will be Hatton's last in England because of the lure of casino money and the demands of his HBO contract. If that's true, Hatton will go out with a bang, assuming of course he bangs out Lazcano, who has been stopped only once 10 years ago by Golden Johnson. That is Hatton's aim but he's already banged out a massive stadium so what happens after that is just sport. The business side of boxing Hatton has already seen was well tended to.

"It's nice to be back, really," Hatton said of his return to both boxing and his hometown. "It's always been a dream of mine to fight in America but it's nice to have the home support again. I don't think there's been a fighter in history with a fan base like it. It takes my breath away, really. It overwhelms me, the support. I don't think you call them fans anymore. You should call them me mates.

"The last fight in Manchester three years ago there were 22,000 and that sold out in six hours. So I had a feeling we had a good chance to sell it out in the space and time which we did do (six hours after tickets first went on sale). This is the fight where, with outstanding performances, we (Hatton and IBF junior welterweight champion Paulie Malignaggi, who is headlining the semi-main event in a rematch with Lovemore N'dou) both re-establish ourselves and then I think fans will come to the United States to see me fight Paul.

"There's a good chance this could be my last fight in England but, I mean, maybe Floyd would like to come over should I get past Lazcano and Malignaggi. He's done so much in his career there's not much more he can do. If he is to beat Oscar (De La Hoya) again there isn't much more so maybe he would come and fight outside the United States for the first time. I have no doubt a Floyd Mayweather fight in England we'd get 100,000 people in the stadium. So, as far as fighting in England again, this could be my last fight but there's a possibility."

Consider the possibility of Hatton-Mayweather II in Wembley Stadium in London or Millenium Stadium or any stadium they can fight that would allow them to shoe horn 100,000 or more people into the stands. Mayweather could not do that on his own nor could any other fighter outside of possibly Oscar De La Hoya. There are ticket sellers and there is the phenomenon that is Ricky Hatton.

Where ever Hatton fights next, and most likely it will be Madison Square Garden in the fall if Malignaggi successfully defends his title Saturday night and Hatton bests Lazcano as expected,

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his crowd will follow. But can he also create a new crowd in the colonies in the way De La Hoya has done with Hispanics outside the U.S.?

That is what De La Hoya's promotional company is banking on and it's why they got involved with Hatton before the Mayweather fight. It is why they are co-promoting Saturday night's affair in Manchester as well, and if things go as planned it will be less a fight and more an infomercial confirming there is indeed only one Ricky Hatton and you better see him soon.

"I really believe, when it comes to a fight, it really isn't so much about who wins or who loses," said Golden Boy CEO Richard Schaefer. "It's the kind of performance you put up in the ring and the kind of performance Ricky put up in the ring against Floyd Mayweather, where he really went toe-to-toe and he was fair and he really gave it his very best, this is what fight fans - not just in the United States but around the world - really appreciate and like about Ricky.

"They know that when Ricky Hatton is going to enter the ring they're going to be entertained and they're going to get their money's worth.

"He has really captured the heart of American fight fans and sports fans, period. I have no doubt that Ricky Hatton today is bigger than he was before and more appreciated and more loved here in the United States and around the world. So I know American fight fans can't wait to see him live on VERSUS (the obscure cable network that will show the Lazcano fight at 3:30 p.m. East Coast time on Saturday) and then hopefully in the fall back here in the United States. It really is testament to Ricky. Ricky is right. There is no other fighter, period, who comes even close to being able to sell 55,000 tickets."

That's because, win or lose, there's only ONE Ricky Hatton. For how much longer remains to be seen of course because at 29 he is an undersized welterweight who must stay at 140 pounds to be at his best and that need does not dovetail cleanly with his partying lifestyle. That outside the ring life has often led to his weight ballooning to nearly 200 pounds stuffed on a 5-foot-6 frame. When one is young one can do such things and then train your way back to 140 without short-term damage but eventually that kind of lifestyle catches up to a fighter and when it does problems, and defeats, soon follow.

If that part of his life doesn't change, and there's no sign it is going to, one day there'll be no Ricky Hatton. But until then there surely is one and he couldn't be any bigger in boxing unless his name was Oscar De La Hoya.