

Could Valero Be Next For Pacquiao?

Written by Ronan Keenan
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The bold mind-set a fighter shows in the ring is usually replicated in his life outside the ropes.

Partaking in motorcycle rides without a helmet was a pastime of Venezuelan puncher Edwin Valero - until an accident left him with a fractured skull.

Valero has learned his lesson about road safety, but a penchant for attacking opponents remains, with thoughts of caution trailing in his rear-view mirror. Since his 2002 debut, Valero has run up a striking 23-0 (23) record, but Golden Boy Promotions have had little chance to capitalize on the feat of their fighter.

The southpaw was banned from boxing in the U.S. after his twelfth fight when the New York State Athletic Commission failed his MRI scan in 2003, deeming that injuries from his motorcycle crash put him at a greater risk inside the ring. Yet authorities outside the U.S. ruled Valero fit to fight, and he subsequently made Japan his adopted home after signing with the promotional outfit Teiken.

Valero had already attracted a cult following among American Internet writers before his U.S. ban, as heated sparring sessions in Californian gyms highlighted his exceptional blend of speed, power and thirst for battle.

But in Japan and Latin America Valero became a renowned figure. The Japanese have a reputation for enjoying circus-like spectacles, as is evidenced by the fact that many of their most watched MMA matchups involved fighters of vastly different sizes. Accordingly, Valero was fed soft opposition and pressurized into quickly annihilating foes so that he could continue his knockout streak to unfathomable numbers.

Most analysts agree that Valero's reflexes have dulled since his early fights in the U.S., but his punching ability and heart remain steadfast, as he proved when traveling to Panama to rip the WBA 130-pound title from the rugged Vicente Mosquera in eleven rounds back in August 2006.

In his first real test against a resolute world-rated fighter, Valero showed he could carry his power into the later rounds, box sensibly when required and deal with a hostile crowd.

Since then, Valero has made three undemanding defenses against obscure challengers. Tonight, he will again face an overmatched opponent when he meets Takashiro Shimada in Tokyo, but Valero is under intense pressure to perform.

In March, the Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation cleared him to box, meaning he can now compete in front of American fans for the first time in five years. Moreover, after the ruling, promoter Bob Arum told Viva Sports that the Venezuelan "is the next likely opponent" for Manny Pacquiao, in what has hitherto been a fantasy showdown.

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Valero should be marketable to American fight fans, with his floppy locks and spectacles separating him from the stereotypical appearance of a big-hitting slugger. However, his U.S. handlers may thwart his affinity for wearing trunks emblazoned with a photo of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez.

“I support [Chávez]’ political ideas a lot. But I’m not his friend,” said Valero, who is ranked number three at 130 pounds by The Ring. “But his government helps me out when I need it. For example, we’ve created the Fundacion Deportiva Edwin Valero [The Edwin Valero Sports Foundation] that helps Venezuelan athletes in need and the government has helped us a lot.”

Valero’s resolve to do things his way makes him an intriguing character, but his desire for finishing off opponents remains his most prominent attribute.

“I’m having trouble making 130 pounds,” admitted the 26-year-old. “[But] I want to stay as a super featherweight where Pacquiao is. He is considered the best at this weight so I want to knock him out and prove I am the best.”