

Berto Tasted Floor, What It Means To Be A Pro

Written by Ron Borges

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Andre Berto always believed he'd get here but now, one victory away from his dream, he finds reality hits hard. So, too, does a guy named Miki Rodriguez, which frankly is a much more real concern to him at the moment than his dream, although the two are tightly intertwined now.

As Berto tried to relax in a Memphis hotel room Wednesday evening, the thought that he would be fighting for the WBC welterweight title Saturday night was on his mind. So, too, was Rodriguez and the criticism of all those who began to question the makeup of Berto's mandible after he was dropped by Cosme Rivera 11 months ago in a fight he otherwise won with ease.

To many the latter came as a shock. Certainly it did to the 24-year-old Berto, who Saturday night will become the first American who competed at the 2004 Olympics to fight for a world title. Of course, even that fact comes with a twist because Berto was disqualified from the U.S. Trials despite being a heavy favorite and had to do some slick maneuvering to end up representing Haiti, the home of his ancestors, in the Games.

Regardless of the road he was forced to take, he found a way to Athens and now he has found a way to the biggest fight of his life, a shot at the title vacated several weeks ago by the retirement of Floyd Mayweather, Jr. When Berto agreed to the match, Mayweather was still the WBC belt holder so this was to have been simply one of the far-too-many interim title fights that have proliferated in recent years. Then boxing's pound-for-pound champion decided he'd had enough and things began to change, not that Berto has fully digested that quite yet.

"At first I didn't realize what it meant," Berto said of Mayweather's retirement. "I didn't know you could vacate the title so fast. When they told me to look on the internet and I saw the Rodriguez fight now was for the WBC title it was crazy.

"For some reason it's the belt everyone wants - the green belt with all the pictures of the champions on the side. But it's surreal to me. It still feels like I'm just going into a regular fight. I don't think I've absorbed it yet but everything I imagined has come true."

Not quite, because there is still the matter of ridding himself of the heavy-handed Rodriguez (29-2, 23 KO). He will come to the arena with the same dream. The same desire to leave Memphis with that familiar green belt with the phony gold front. It is why fighters fight, putting aside the money of course.

But guys like Berto don't fight for money. They earn it and they understand the business side of what can come from winning on Saturday but they fight for a dream that in his case has been alive since he first walked into a gym as a kid growing up in Florida in a family whose father was one of the original PRIDE mixed martial arts fighters and whose brother, and soon sister, also entered into the growing world of MMA.

Berto took the more conventional route and in four years it has taken him to the doorstep of a

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world championship. If he wins he will quickly be thrust into the forefront of one of boxing's most respected division and one of its hottest – a 147-pound class that includes Miguel Cotto, Antonio Margarito, Paul Williams, Shane Mosley, Zab Judah, Luis Collazo and a roster of other competent and dangerous men.

Rodriguez is such a fighter, one not well known to the general public but a guy who can test a man's jaw if given the opportunity. Because of that Berto actually feels blessed that Rivera put him on his back for a moment. And equally so for a tough night spent exchanging punches with David Estrada last September in a WBC and IBF title eliminator Berto won by stopping Estrada in the 11th round of a fight that taught him what it meant to be a professional.

At the level he's now at it means the Beatles' "It's Been A Hard Day's Night" often becomes your anthem.

"After the Rivera fight I was really sour on the situation," Berto (21-0, 18 KO) said of the night Berto was dropped by a sudden and unexpected reality. "After a few weeks I appreciated it more. I ain't gonna lie. I got careless and he caught me with a good shot. It was embarrassing.

"A lot of boxing writers changed their tone on me after that and that humbled me but it put things back in perspective. That knockdown taught me how fast everything can be taken away from me. Now I train like I'm the underdog and I fight with more respect.

"These guys are crafty veterans for a reason. Cosme Rivera taught me a nice lesson – don't get too comfortable with them or they'll sit you on your butt. That fight, and the Estrada fight, introduced me to the professional game."

Rodriguez is expected to continue that hard knocks education but Berto's promoter believes the time is right for him and opportunity is knocking. All he needs to do is answer the door – and remember to duck when necessary.

"He was ready to be a pro before he was ever a pro," said Lou DiBella. "He's been carefully groomed for this. He's in with a puncher but Rodriguez is not as complete a fighter as Berto. Andre just has to be careful. He's an aggressive guy who can punch but he has to remember to defend himself.

"If he passes this test, and I know he will, he'll be ready for Mosley, Judah, those kinds of guys. Not next year. Next fight. There has been speculation about his chin but he's always gotten up and won. Now he's in with a guy who can punch like a mule and he has to respect that. I think he will because now he realizes a pro can hurt you, even though he was more embarrassed at being down than hurt."

Berto, of course, has long ago proven he can do some hurting himself. His 18 knockouts, in particular his stoppage of Estrada at the end of the most difficult fight of his young career, have made that point over and over. It is one of the things that have made him a growing star and a potential challenge for someone like Cotto, who is himself a relentless aggressor.

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But what the Estrada fight taught him was not that he could punch but that he could function even when the pain is great and the missiles are incoming as well as outgoing.

“I had to dig down,” Berto said. “It wasn’t just physical any more. It turned into a mental situation. I had to break down the will of a guy who didn’t give a damn about me. After that fight I had bumps and bruises. I was so sore. My ribs, my head, everything was sore. Taking those shots is tough. That kind of fight separates the men from the boys.

“Until you’re put in that situation you do not know at all if you can handle it. It’s a test you have to pass. After the third round I went back to my corner and told my trainer ‘He’s coming out so fast. I crack him and he acts like he don’t feel nothing!’ He just kept coming steady forward and I had to answer.

“You start talking to yourself. You start telling yourself out loud, ‘Ok. Ok.’ That’s how crazy it is. People have no idea what it’s like when you have a lion coming at you and he’s not going to give you no space. Right then you put up or you bow out.”

Berto put up that night and believes he will do the same Saturday against Rodriguez. After that, he knows, reality will hit. And so too will guys even better than Miguel Angel Rodriguez...but only after he proves he won’t be bedeviled by him in Memphis.

“He’s strong for his level of opponents but he hasn’t fought someone as fast and strong as I am,” Berto said frankly. “He’s a tall, lanky guy. A heavy-handed kid with sneaky power so I know I have to be careful.

“To this day I think about the Cosme Rivera fight. It reminds me if I get stupid and slip up something can happen. (Oscar) De La Hoya went through that early in his career. (Felix) Trinidad went through it. It happens when you’re young and a highly regarded prospect. The important thing is that you get up and learn from it.”

Andre Berto has. Saturday night, at the expense of Miguel Angel Rodriguez, he intends to make that clear no matter the price.

“This is a big opportunity for me but he’s looking at it as a big opportunity for him,” Berto said. “I got tremendous respect for fighters. It’s a tough way to earn a living. It’s not a team game. It’s individual. And it’s not just a physical game. It’s mental. You’re in the middle of a war where you’ve got two choices - you have to keep fighting or you let him destroy you.”

Andre Berto intends to do the former and has no intention of allowing the latter to happen. This is his dream, not Miguel Angel Rodriguez’s, and he intends to live it.

“I’m excited but I want to treat this as a normal fight,” Berto said. “It’s something more for everyone else to talk about. I just want to go out and do what I do and leave with the victory. If everything goes well and I’m WBC champion on Sunday then that realization process will kick in.”