

Juan Diaz, Katsidis, Rocky and Barrios

Written by David A. Avila
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Houston, we have lift off.

Ok, that sounds corny, but there's nothing corny about the fight card that pits two Houston Colt 45s, Juan Diaz and Rocky Juarez, against refined brawlers Michael Katsidis and Jorge Barrios at the Toyota Center in Houston, Texas on Sat. Sept. 6.

Both fights are going to be televised by HBO and co-promoted by Golden Boy Promotions.

Before their last fights, Diaz and Katsidis were both undefeated and riding high on a wave of popularity and respect. But that came crashing down as the pair endured their first defeats as pros.

Somebody is getting their second defeat if they can overcome the mistakes made in their last fights.

"I didn't listen to my corner very well. I got cut, I got stubborn, and wanted to fight it out instead of stepping out and using my jab and using angles," said Diaz (33-1, 17 KOs), who is contesting the Aussie for the vacant IBO lightweight title. "I learned I just have to listen to my corner."

Katsidis echoed those same sentiments.

Diaz held the WBA, WBO and IBF lightweight titles and was considered nearly unbeatable by many boxing experts after forcing Coachella's Julio Diaz to retire in his corner and overwhelming the hard-hitting Acelino Freitas seven months earlier.

But entering the boxing ring against Nate Campbell in Cancun, Mexico while under mental stress and anger proved more than he could handle against the wily and talented Florida fighter.

"What I learned from that fight was no matter what happens outside the ring with my promoters or with anyone, I have to listen to my corner," said Diaz (33-1, 17 KOs) whose three world titles were lost in a split-decision defeat to Campbell last March. "It was an awkward situation fighting in Mexico too."

It's all a learning experience for the former student at the University of Houston.

"I think I'm a better fighter because of the experience against Nate Campbell," Diaz says.

Australia's Katsidis also endured his first loss in March.

"It was the first time I ever lost as a professional and the first time I was ever knocked down as a professional," said Katsidis, 28, who was dropped twice in the first round and stopped in the 10th round by Joel Casamayor. "It was a learning experience."

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Few fighters enter a ring as aggressive as the Australian fighter with Greek ancestry. He proved that against Britain's Graham Earl and against Filipino slugger Czar Amonsot in a bloody affair.

Before his last fight, Katsidis knew only one gear and that was with wheels screeching and tires burning.

"I was trying to knock him out in the first round," said Katsidis who bore into Casamayor looking to land one of his murderous punches. "He caught me first."

After suffering two knockdowns in the first round, it didn't look like the Aussie was going to last very long. The crowd anticipated a quick knockout victory for Casamayor when suddenly Katsidis struck back with one of his own bombs.

The fight was on.

The crowd of more than 5,000 outdoors saw one of the most action-packed fights of the year when the Cuban and Aussie traded haymakers with each other. In the sixth round a right hand pounded Casamayor out of the ring and into the lap of a ring official. He made it back to the ring to eventually win by technical knockout.

"While trying to look for that knockout I left myself open," said Katsidis. "Casamayor took advantage of it like the great fighter he is."

Despite the losses, both Katsidis and Diaz are considered among the most exciting pro boxers in the world and are widely recognized wherever they go.

"Sometimes when I'm walking along the beach somebody will walk up to me and say they saw me fight," said Katsidis who trains in Southern California while preparing for a fight. "Just the other day I was near the pier in Venice Beach when they asked me about my next fight."

Diaz, who lives and trains in Houston, said fan recognition has only recently reached him.

"After being a three-time world champion you're recognized a little more," said Diaz, 24. "Now when I go to the local Wal-mart or Home Depot not only Hispanics recognize me, but blacks, whites and Chinese know who I am. It's really motivating."

Diaz says he needs little motivation to prepare for Katsidis.

"I didn't want to take a tune up fight. I don't think I'd be able to get ready for an easy opponent after fighting world-class fighters and world champions. It'd be hard to fight somebody not ranked in the top 10," said Diaz. "He (Katsidis) is aggressive like me."

Brenden Smith, who trains Katsidis, said the match up could be startling.

"On paper it has the makings of one of the best fights of the decade," said Smith, who views both fighters bearing a similar aggressive style. "If styles make fights, it could be the start of a

great trilogy.”

Diaz expects his hometown fans to see one of the best fights of the year.

“It’s very exciting for me to be fighting in front of my hometown,” said Diaz. “Now more people recognize me this time around and it’s very motivating.”

Another Houston fighter

Also on the fight card is Rocky Juarez, the former 2000 U.S. Olympian and former silver medal winner in a 12-round bout against Argentina’s Jorge Barrios (47-3-1, 34 KOs).

Juarez is a native of Houston and finally returns home to perform after a four-year absence.

“It’s been a long time since I fought in Houston,” said Juarez (27-4, 19 KOs) who has never fought in the Toyota Center.

Juarez’s last prizefight was in November 2007 when he accepted a match against Mexico’s Juan Manuel Marquez for the WBC junior lightweight title. It was an offer he couldn’t refuse.

“When they offered a fight against Marquez I had to take it. Not because of the money or the world title, but Marquez is considered one of the greatest fighters out of Mexico,” said Juarez who lost by unanimous decision but gave a good performance.

Barrios is a former world champion known for his aggressiveness and warrior mentality.

“I’m not a brawler but if it comes to a point that I have to brawl, then I’ll brawl,” said Juarez, 28, who’s more known as an inside fighter with a good left hook. “Barrios is a brawler.”

The former Olympian is fighting at 130 pounds, but says he can easily make 126 pounds in a flash.

“Wherever I can fight for a world title is where I want to be,” said Juarez.

If NASA were still going strong in Houston they might want to take a look at this fight card. It’s going to be a blast.