

4-1 Underdog Forbes Wants A Street Fight

Written by Ronan Keenan

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Being undersized is nothing new for Steve Forbes. Having been born two months early weighing just two pounds, the Oregon native had to battle against the odds to make it into the world. These days, the 5'7 fighter confronts opponents in a weight class that's 17-pounds north of where he won a world title eight years ago.

On Saturday, "2 Pounds" will attempt to wrest Andre Berto's piece of the welterweight championship at California's Home Depot Center on HBO Boxing After Dark. But combating a highly-acclaimed puncher with a 22-0 (19) record pales in comparison to Forbes' struggles as an infant.

"My mother was around 16 when she had me and got out and partied, things like that," he recalls. "I was told I was two pounds when I was born, and I was lucky to be alive. Even when I got out of the hospital, I still had problems with my lungs and heart."

After catching sight of Evander Holyfield on the cover of The Ring magazine, the small, almost fragile, ten year-old kid knew he found his calling, even if nobody else would believe him.

"I couldn't play outside in the rain," he remembers. "I'd get the shakes. But once I saw that [Holyfield] picture, something clicked: 'That's what I'm going to do.' And right then and there, that's what I set my sights on."

"[My family] were petrified of me boxing. 'Oh, he's going to get hurt. ... Poor baby, if he gets hit, what's going to happen to him?," he told ESPN earlier this year. "Everybody was overprotective of me as a kid. Even the neighbors. They weren't even related, but they were [saying], 'Is he gonna be hurt?'"

They needn't have worried. A firm dedication to his craft has helped Forbes develop an almost impregnable defense based on nifty head movement and sharp reflexes.

After compiling an amateur record of 57-10 with five Washington and Oregon Golden Gloves titles, Forbes turned professional in 1996, around the same time as noted Olympic stars Floyd Mayweather Jr., Fernando Vargas and David Reid.

Forbes entered the paid ranks with little fanfare, but he developed a relationship with the renowned Mayweather family and subsequently relocated to Las Vegas.

"I used to sleep on Roger [Mayweather's] couch," Forbes told David Avila. "It was Floyd [Senior] who told me I couldn't go back to Portland. He said he could make me a champion."

And four years later the eldest Mayweather did help Steve win a version of the junior lightweight championship, with a victory over the rugged John Brown securing the vacant IBF bauble. But Forbes would only make one defense of the belt – a points win over Brown in a rematch –

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before weight-making difficulties saw him stripped of the crown when he scaled 134¾ pounds for his fight with David Santos in 2002.

Despite evidence that he had clearly outgrown the division, Forbes continued to campaign at 130-pounds, but he came up short in title shots against Carlos Hernandez and Yodsanan Sor Nanthachai.

Forbes' slick skills helped him avoid punishment, but his lack of strength and one-punch concussive power saw him outworked by the tough pressure-fighters. Moreover, those traits didn't particularly endear him to promoters and with a spotty record and thin fanbase, Forbes was forced to compete on small shows for little change.

"After I had to give up my title I was pretty much left out in the cold," he told reporters last spring. "I was off for 14 months after I lost my last title shot (to Nanthachai in 2004). Nothing was going on. I was another sad story in boxing. A wasted talent type of thing."

But an opportunity on ESPN's reality show *The Contender* changed Forbes' career in 2006. His name stood out relative to the assortment of unheralded fighters, but there was a catch – the fights would be at 150 pounds.

Regardless, the smallest man on the show made it to the finale, but lost a split decision to Grady Brewer, who was a natural junior middleweight. Forbes was evidently the more skilled boxer, but he was again outworked by a busier, physically imposing fighter.

Still, Forbes pocketed a then career-high purse of \$75,000 with his performances and honest personality highlighting the show, leading to significant opportunities when the series ended.

"Before *The Contender* I thought my career might be over," admitted Forbes, 31. "But *The Contender* revitalized my career."

Forbes impressed in subsequent high-profile outings against Demetrius Hopkins and Francisco Bojado, defeating the latter on points, while losing a decision to Hopkins that many in the boxing media regarded as the worst in 2007.

But 2008 has brought better luck with Forbes securing a showdown with Oscar De La Hoya last May, as the "Golden Boy" viewed Forbes as an ideal tune-up for Mayweather Jr.'s polished style. Forbes showed admirable heart in losing a comprehensive points verdict and even left De La Hoya with a cracked cheekbone.

Reported Ron Borges: "Forbes certainly proved he's got a top-level chin. He has never been knocked off his feet and De La Hoya, despite his dominance, could not find a way to change that. Much of the night he was drilling Forbes with a power jab and some hard body shots and left hooks to the head behind it but never did he manage to get Forbes into any kind of serious trouble."

"It was an honor to fight Oscar," said Forbes, 33-6 (9). "It was great to be in there and not go

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down. I hope I proved I'm a top-level fighter."

Yet some sections of the boxing media question Forbes' eligibility to challenge an aggressor of Berto's unbridled talent. Against De La Hoya, Forbes did confirm that he can hang with the sport's upper echelon, but he has not shown the qualities required of a main event television fighter. Since his days on *The Contender*, he has tried to impress audiences by refraining from moving much around the ring, but his fights lack drama as he routinely makes opponents miss, but counters with comparatively unspectacular blows.

A win over a potential superstar like Berto would go a long way toward rectifying marketability issues.

Conversely, Berto has had no trouble creating a buzz, attacking with a dazzling blend of speed and power; launching assaults from angles, while working off a pounding jab. Physically, the 25-year-old seems to have every advantage. But Forbes believes he possesses the mental toughness that can prevent the mismatch some commentators are predicting.

"If you watch the old school fighters, they always knew how to nullify the younger guys," says Forbes, who is reunited with Mayweather Snr. for this fight. "Younger guys don't have patience, so I have to be smart and keep making sure I know where my hands are at all times. I need to be consistent all night.

"I will try to make it a street fight; I'll show him I can street fight."

In recent outings Berto has seemingly won without exertion against overmatched opponents like Miguel Rodriguez and Michael Trabant. On Saturday, the Florida fighter may have to take his game to another level and he has not been afraid to acknowledge the test.

"I'm really going to have something to prove [against Forbes]," said Berto. "Forbes has never been knocked out, he's never been stopped. My last few guys, that I've been in with, I've been putting them away pretty early so it's going to be some good work for me."

It may seem discourteous to refer to a consummate pro like Forbes as "good work" but the 4/1 underdog is used to playing the supporting role. Against De La Hoya, he was loudly heckled upon entering the ring.

Yet, as Forbes reminds us, "They booed me on the way in, but they cheered me on the way out."