

Mexican Heavyweight Chris “Nightmare” Arreola

Written by David A. Avila

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It's common knowledge among boxing promoters or anyone in the pugilistic business that the engine that drives the sport is mainly powered from Hispanics in the Southwest, especially those coming from south of the border.

Mexicans love boxing.

For more than a century the search for the first Mexican heavyweight who could win the world title has been a futile search.

But through time and generations of growth genes being fed into the Mexican athlete, a new hope has emerged from the 20 million Mexicans living in this country. His name is Chris Arreola.

Sure, there have been many world champions of Mexican descent. The first world champion was Solly “Garcia” Smith who lived in Los Angeles and grabbed a featherweight title in 1897. But not until now has someone emerged that has Mexican boxing fans perking their heads up at the mention of Arreola's chances at a heavyweight title.

Boxing fans get their first real glimpse when Arreola (25-0, 22 KOs) meets Florida's Travis Walker (28-1-1, 22 KOs) at the Citizens Business Bank Arena on Saturday, Nov. 29. The fight will also be shown on HBO.

Will Arreola be the first heavyweight world champion of Mexican blood? There have been several others in the past who fell way short.

Slowly, like a new forming tidal wave, interest and support in Arreola's talent is growing across the Southwest and into the eastern parts of the country. Even the most critical experts see something in the violent style of Riverside, California's Arreola.

HBO's Larry Merchant is among those who believe Arreola is America's best hope to crack the heavyweight monopoly by European fighters. Wladimir Klitschko has the IBF and WBO titles, his brother Vitali Klitschko has the WBC title and Russia's Ruslan Chagaev has the WBA title.

Today, though boxing remains a vibrant sport in America, the heavyweight species is almost extinct.

A quest to discover the first Mexican heavyweight world champion has been ongoing since the 1960s. Every so often a large Mexican heavyweight arrives and the trumpets blow and towels are waved but the shouts grow quiet after a dozen or more fights. Mexican boxing fans are looking for a larger version of Julio Cesar Chavez and keep getting Fats Domino.

Dan Goossen, president of Goossen-Tutor Promotions, says that Mexican fighters are very popular around the world because they tend to throw punches with abandon. For a Mexican

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fighter, defense is not nearly as important as throwing punches.

“Chris Arreola is an aggressive heavyweight who likes to throw punches. That’s what drives the fans,” said Goossen, who promoted former lightweight world champions Gabe and Rafael Ruelas. “People don’t go to Dodger Stadium to see base hits. They want to see home runs. That’s what Arreola delivers.”

Mexican heavyweights in the past

The Riverside heavyweight is not the first of Mexican lineage to arouse the interest of boxing fans. A short list of other heavyweights with names like Manuel Ramos, Eddie “The Animal” Lopez, Alex Garcia and Joey Orbillo were previously anointed as potential heavyweight world champions, but failed.

“Joey Orbillo had a real good jab and could move around real good,” said Art “Handsome Slim” Carrillo, who saw Orbillo box against Jerry Quarry at the Olympic Auditorium in the 1960s. “He was just too small. He would be a cruiserweight today.”

Ramos, Lopez, and Garcia were seen as credible fighters and potential world champions who were on the verge to a world title match when they crashed and burned in their biggest moment.

Ramos was a big heavyweight out of Mexico City coming off a 15-fight win streak in June 1968 when he fought “Smokin” Joe Frazier for the world title in Madison Square Garden. Ramos had beaten Eddie Machen and Ernie Terrell and was seen as a strong opponent. He lasted only two rounds.

“I remember he stunned Joe Frazier in that first round,” said Rick Smith, a writer with a California-based boxing magazine. “In the second round Joe Frazier just took him apart.”

In the early 1980s Lopez of East Los Angeles was seen as a very capable heavyweight contender who once audaciously challenged Muhammad Ali to a fight for “one dollar” when he ran across him in a Beverly Hills hotel. But the rough and tumble fighter had problems maintaining discipline in the gym and problems with the law curtailed his career.

“He had that fierceness in the ring that you need to have,” said Carrillo, a former boxer who now trains fighters in the Riverside area. “But he could never get over that hump.”

In the early 1990s came a fighter out of the San Fernando Valley named Alex Garcia. He was set to meet George Foreman, who was poised for a world title fight. It was going to be televised and an offer near \$1 million was on the table. Garcia declined that fight to take a “tune up” fight in Las Vegas and lost.

“There are no tune up fights,” said Ben Lira, who was training Garcia at the time. “Every fight is a fight.”

Garcia never got a lucrative offer again.

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Searching for Mexican heavyweights

Every boxing promoter has searched for the next heavyweight champion of the world. Top Rank’s Bob Arum had a giant boxer named Tye Fields who had all of the physical tools needed to impress boxing crowds; he was knocked out last June by Monte Barrett.

Another promoter, Cedric Kushner, specialized in heavyweights and had more than three-dozen on his ledger. But they all failed and he was forced to give up the search.

Now Goossen-Tutor Promotions has signed more than two-dozen heavyweight contenders and prospects that are led by James “Lights Out” Toney, Fast Eddie Chambers and several good young heavyweights like Arreola and Walker.

“You know Travis Walker is no slouch and feels very confident about beating Chris Arreola,” said Goossen, who has promoted for 29 years. “Travis (Walker) claims no Mexican heavyweight will win on November 29th.”

The pressure is on Arreola.

In the Riverside heavyweight’s last fight he destroyed New York’s Israel “King Kong” Garcia inside three rounds at Soboba Casino this past September. The beating was so one-sided that journalists at ringside felt it was bad matchmaking until they looked at Garcia’s record and noticed he had only one loss in 20 pro fights.

Still, Goossen is not rubbing his hands in glee. He’s been in this situation before with a talented heavyweight on the verge of a world title match.

“David Tua was supposed to be a world champion too,” said Goossen, who was associated with America Presents, a boxing organization aligned with the hard-hitting Samoan slugger. “What strapped David Tua was his size. He just wasn’t able to get to that level of a world championship.”

Goossen says that Tua’s power and aggressiveness attracted boxing fans, but he fell short against Lennox Lewis when they met for the world title in 2000. Size won’t be a problem for Arreola who stands 6’ 4”.

“In Arreola, you’re looking at a real big heavyweight,” Goossen says with a hint of excitement in his tone. “For many years the highest paid athletes were normally the heavyweight champion of the world. Mike Tyson made more than your best athletes today make. I believe Arreola can be the first boxer since those Tyson days to be the highest paid athlete in all of sports.”

Will the search for the first Mexican heavyweight world champion finally be over?

(The first of three parts.)