

Could Berto Be Looking Past Collazo?

Written by Ron Borges

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Andre Berto likes to write things down because that's how he intends to keep himself on a path he knows can lead to only one thing – hard nights in the welterweight division.

The World Boxing Council champion, who will defend that title Saturday night in Biloxi, MS. against former title holder Luis Collazo, had hoped to be fighting a week later against a far more high profile opponent but Shane Mosley made clear even when their representatives were negotiating that he really had no interest in getting in the ring with a 25-year-old undefeated power puncher who arrives at every arena with one intention – to knock you unconscious. So he wrote down his thoughts and moved on.

Mosley, a former champion at lightweight, welterweight and junior middleweight champion, seemed headed on a collision course with Berto when negotiations for a fight with WBA champion Antonio Margarito hit a monetary snag but that hurdle was cleared when HBO agreed to throw more money at Margarito and so Berto was left out in the cold, although not for long. It was then that he went back to his notebook, the place where he records his thoughts as well as reminders to himself that success in the ring is often determined by how life is handled outside it.

On both fronts, Andre Berto has been doing just fine, something he believes will continue on Saturday against a difficult southpaw who is not only the best fighter he's faced since turning professional but someone who is far more than the public thinks he is.

"I've been blessed to be a thinking type man," Berto said from his room at Beau Rivage, the Mississippi casino where the fight will be held. "Even though I have a lot going on I like to go home and sit in my house and analyze my life, what's happening and where I'm going.

"I've always been that type of kid. Even in middle school I'd lock myself in my room, listen to some slow music and envision my life on the international scene. I understand what this fight is for me."

For the undefeated (23-0, 19 KOs) Berto, it has taken five years as a professional to get to this point, yet he knows he has not yet really arrived. Although recently ESPN the Magazine did a six-page spread on him entitled "1506 days with Boxing's Next Great Thing" not even that has fooled him.

Lose Saturday night, he understands, and it will be 1506 days alone with whom again? Such is the solitary life and the dangerous existence of living the life of boxing's next great thing.

"Life in general is a test," Berto said. "It's the same in the ring. This fight is one of those tests. I was disappointed we couldn't work it out to fight Mosley but I can't look past Luis Collazo.

"To be successful in boxing you've got to get above the hype. You can't take a lot for granted or

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you'll get caught up in the hype and lose a fight. If that happens you'll see how fast it all stops. I've written that in my notebook."

Berto has written many things in that notebook about life and the difficulty of finding success inside a boxing ring but he hasn't written about Collazo. Everything he needs to know about him is etched in his mind, the place where he believes the fight will be won Saturday night.

Collazo is a slick moving southpaw who most of the world believed defeated Ricky Hatton three years ago in Boston. He didn't get the win that night and so was forced to surrender the WBA welterweight title he'd won just 13 months earlier but few ringside observers agreed with the decision.

Unlike Berto, the light-hitting Collazo (29-3, 14 KOs) got a shot at Mosley and the interim WBC title nine months later but fractured his thumb early in the fight and lost a unanimous decision that seemed to send him back into boxing's dark shadows where most fighters are forced to scramble for a living.

That loss was followed by surgery and an 11-month layoff but Collazo has fought twice this year against inferior opposition to prepare himself to do more than face Boxing's Next Great Thing this weekend. He's in Biloxi to beat him, believing if he does it will open the same kind of doors for him Berto believes he's already knocking on.

Andre Berto consults his notebook and is reminded of the history of so many young fighters before him who got to this point and then forgot how it happened and he has concluded that Saturday night is the only important night in his life right now. For the moment, Luis Collazo is his Mosley. He is his Margarito. He is his Miguel Cotto or Paul Williams.

He has put Collazo mentally in that mythical spot because if he doesn't beat him, Berto understands there is no Mosley in his future. No Margarito. No Cotto. Nobody but a familiar opponent to a lot of young fighters – Mr. Nobody.

"I believe 2009 is going to be the year I get to one of those big name fights but if I don't get by Collazo first that doesn't happen," Berto said. "When Mosley made it clear he didn't want to fight me it showed me where I'm at but I know I'm the youngest guy in the group (of top welterweights) so I have to fight guys like Collazo and Steve Forbes (who he dominated in a lop-sided decision last September) first.

"I have to fight the type of people they don't want to fight and I have to beat them. It's not easy to look good against those style fighters but I have to do it if 2009 is going to be the year I make my name.

"People know me already and they want to rush me along but I have to stay patient. I know I'm not a complete fighter yet. I'm still learning. Collazo is like another test."

Maybe he is a final exam of a sort because after him the list of names grows short for Berto. He is almost there. Almost at the place where the top welterweights can deny him no longer.

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For a brief moment he thought he'd already reached that point when the Margarito-Mosley fight fell apart but now it's back on for Jan. 24 and so he has other work to do. In the end, it may be the kind of graduate work a student needs to really have command of his subject.

"Guys like Collazo are spoilers," Berto said. "He has a style that could give me problems and I have to be ready to solve those problems. I believe I am.

"He's a measuring stick for where I'm at. I believe everything happens for a reason. I'm trying to pave my own path and this is another step down that path to where I want to be. Eventually I'll get in with the top guys. When I do, I intend to prevail."

If you've got a notebook write that down. Somewhere Andre Berto already has.