

## Give Him A Solid 'B': Berto Passes The Test

Written by Ron Borges  
Sunday, 18 January 2009 19:00

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Andre Berto took a professional graduate course Saturday night in Biloxi, MS. and passed it in a way that will serve him well if he takes the difficulty of his long night with Luis Collazo and studies why it happened.

These days it is so rare that tough matches like this one are made that there is a tendency to dismiss the winner as less than what you thought he was when it's over rather than to see such a fight for what it should be – the maturation process of a guy who admitted to TSS before the fight that he knew he was not yet a complete fighter.

Berto was right about that and it is only from difficult challenges like the one Collazo posed that he can close the circle and make himself all he is potentially capable of. Yet you can expect to hear in the days and weeks ahead that A) Collazo deserved the decision, which he did not although he most certainly deserves a rematch and a chance to prove he did; and B) that Berto is not boxing's next great thing as a six-page magazine article claimed he was not too long ago.

This is more a sign of the times than of any weakness in Berto. Back in the days when there was boxing, baseball and everything else, these were the kind of fights that made great fighters. They were demanded of you long before you became a 25-year-old champion, as the WBC welterweight champion is today.

Most importantly, they were how you learned your difficult craft. You learned by taking risks and surviving them or not, which is what Berto managed to do.

Sure he was wobbled in the opening round by a big left hand behind Collazo's distracting right jab. Sure he slumped into the ropes and looked to be in trouble. Sure he seemed confused at times by the southpaw Collazo and struggled on the inside with few answers to Collazo's counter punching but he also fought back from it all and by the end of the round had hurt Collazo.

Mismatches and one-sided domination have become so much the norm these days that there is a tendency for many fight fans and more than a few television network executives to panic after a night like Berto went through because most promoters and matchmakers do their best work not by making fights but by avoiding them. Yet the 25-year-old Berto found himself in the opposite situation with Collazo. He found himself in a contentious battle and he found a way to win, which is the definition of his job.

Collazo (29-4, 14 KO) is an underrated guy who is far more difficult to beat than the general public knows. He lost a portion of the welterweight title that he briefly held in a similarly close and controversial fight with Ricky Hatton two years ago when many people left the Boston Garden believing he deserved the decision and some folks surely felt the same way at Beau Rivage Casino in Biloxi, MS. Saturday night at the conclusion of the hotly contested battle despite the fact the WBC welterweight champion rallied late and was clearly the stronger fighter

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in the final round that decided the outcome.

The real controversy should not have been the decision, a unanimous one for Berto, but rather the 116-111 card of judge Bill Clancy. According to him, Berto won all but three rounds (Berto suffered a one-point deduction for excessive holding), a conclusion that was so far from reality that someone should immediately schedule an appointment with an optometrist for him.

“That’s crazy,” Collazo (29-4, 14 KO) said. “One of the judges had it 116-111? There is no way in hell the fight was so far apart. It should have been 114-113 all around.”

It was on the other two cards and rightfully so after Collazo, known much more for his relentlessness than his punching power, was unable to follow up on his early advantage but he kept hurting Berto through the first half of the fight on the inside, countering him and damaging his body.

It was there that Berto made clear there remains much work to do for he seemed to have no idea how to score at close quarters and spent much of his time there holding until he was finally penalized a point for his constant grappling.

Berto’s corner wanted him on the outside, working from behind his fast jab at long range but it took half the fight for him to figure out how to get there. In the meantime his deficiencies were obvious and troubling. But the important point is not so much that he struggled for a time against a worthy opponent but rather that he kept fighting and ultimately found a way to fight at the range that was best for him.

Before the fight Berto conceded he was still an incomplete fighter and the proof was right there in front of him at Beau Rivage when he was repeatedly tied up or left holding inside while Collazo was damaging him to the body and with crisp counter punches. But when Berto finally found his distance he began to take control of the fight with superior hand speed and power and it wore the 27-year-old Collazo down. As the fight moved into its second half, Berto was the fresher fighter and he took advantage of it only to see the challenger rally back late, cutting Berto with an accidental head butt and hurting him to the body again in rounds nine and 10. It is from such moments that fighters are born or exposed.

“He banged it up with me,” the undefeated Berto (24-0, 19 KO) said. “I knew I had to win the last round. I dug deep down to get it.”

It was not so much that Berto was particularly effective that round but he was far busier, as he had been in most of the final four or five rounds, and that carried the day for him. Sure it was by the thinnest of margins but that is not significant. What is significant was in Round 12 he was the one throwing and landing and seemingly wanting the title more than Collazo did and finding a way to keep it.

“It was a close call,” Berto admitted. “Luis Collazo is a monster. He caught me with some clean shots and he knocked me off balance (in the first round). This was two tough young guys going at it in the toughest division in the sport.”

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The sad thing is that boxing has become so used to not seeing these types of tight fights between young equals that when it happens there is too often a rush to doubt the future of the winner rather than praise him for his victory. What Andre Berto showed was that he needs work to master in-fighting but also that when pushed he will push back and when challenged he will stand his ground and deliver. He may not yet be ready for Antonio Margarito or Miguel Cotto but this should have come as no news bulletin to anyone paying attention. What was more apparent was what his potential is if he takes the time to hone his craft completely.

Poor Collazo, meanwhile, has now been life-and-death with both Hatton and Berto and come up on the short end but he certainly has established himself as a worthy title contender for anyone in the welterweight division. Berto's promoter, Lou DiBella, promised him a rematch after Berto's next title defense and although it may not happen, boxing being what it is, he's a guy more likely to stand behind his word than most. Either way, the fact is Andre Berto became a better fighter Saturday night because of his close encounter with Luis Collazo.

"We left it all in the ring," the game Collazo said. "He came out with the decision and hopefully we can do it again."

Once there was a time when that would have been forced by the public but today the sport works differently. Managers and promoters are not often looking for the kind of challenge Andre Berto got Saturday night, which is a shame because it is only from those kind of fights that he will learn both his craft and who he really is inside a boxing ring.