He is not the sort who when he is not assigned to an event, chooses to steer clear of all things fistic. Larry Merchant didn't work the Juan Manuel Marquez/Juan Diaz HBO Championship Boxing card in Texas on Saturday, but he did watch that thriller, and the entertaining co-feature as well. TSS reached out to one of the fight game's top pound for pound analysts, poet laureate Larry Merchant, to get his take on what went down.

Merchant was impressed by JMM's work against Diaz, and like all of us wondered early in the fight if the 35-year-old had gone graybeard overnight, and wouldn't be able to keep up with the young buck Diaz, ten years his junior.

"It was a terrific fight," Merchant told TSS. "Like Hopkins/Pavlik, Mosley/Margarito, the veteran fighter looked years younger when he could deal with a fighter coming straight at him. Marquez has made an unusual transition from pure boxer to boxer/puncher/warrior. Boxers often slow down, fight flat-footed as they get older. But it's not common to show the raw fighting spirit that was hidden inside Marquez for years. Early in the fight, it raised questions as Marquez was being assaulted by Diaz was this one of those occurrences like when Hatton fought Tszyu and the older fighter was exposed to not having enough to deal with that kind of aggression and hunger?" As we all saw, Marquez did have enough to deal with it, as his second wind kicked in, and he started to kick butt.

Merchant disagrees with me, and thinks the John draw call in the fight against Juarez wasn't a horrid travesty. "I thought Juarez fought well," Merchant said, "and this is two fights in a row where he's fought good fights against good fighters, and he looked better than he has previously. I think a fight against WBO featherweight champion Steven Luevano is a natural. I think Juarez has revived his career, and he can stand up to anyone at 126 and 130." Larry and I diverge on this issue, which is rare for me: I don't like the amount of flush shots Juarez takes, believe John schooled him pretty good, and fear that he is a fighter destined to end his career never having prevailed in a signature bout. We shall see how it plays out for the ever game Texan…

In higher weight divisions, Merchant is psyched for Pacquiao/Hatton on May 2. He thinks Hatton can maul and brawl and make a solid account of himself. "Hatton is strong, tough, very willing and smart. He's got a chance to make a serious fight out of it."

That fight's outcome will determine where chips fall for other fighters. Other chip movers I asked Merchant about include Floyd Mayweather. Merchant notes that Mayweather advisor Leonard Ellerbe is out of hibernation, sniffing around, seeing what's what. Merchant thinks there is a chance that this is a tease, and Floyd will stay away. He also thinks we might see Floyd and Oscar do it again. But Merchant's gut tells him Oscar will pack it in, that he has plenty of money, and will stay close enough to the sport with Golden Boy Promotions to keep him busy. "I think he's not going to come back, it's just a hunch on my part," Merchant said. (Dang, two divergences in one More Merchant column! I say Oscar's stubborn pride speaks to him, and he

takes one more bout, a farewell fight.) Merchant reminds us that both Marvin Hagler and Lennox Lewis turned down eight figures to meet Ray Leonard and Vitali Klitschko, respectively, so there are precedents for folks leaving great gobs of cash on a table.

Merchant fans should know that he will work the April 11 Paul Williams/Winky Wright clash in Vegas, and is amped to see Chris Arreola on that night (against Jameel McCline?). April 11 will be a fistic orgy for fight fans, as HBO will also run a Pacquiao/Hatton 24/7, and a doc on the Thrilla In Manilla, Merchant pointed out. Three weeks later, Merchant will provide his insights on the Pacquiao/Hatton clash.