

## Cautious, Sharp Khan Beats Legend Barrera

Written by Ronan Keenan  
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Marco Antonio Barrera had intentions of surpassing his idol Julio Cesar Chavez by one-day becoming the first Mexican fighter to win world titles in four weight divisions. But on Saturday he emulated Chavez by having his status as a world-class fighter shattered by a lightning-fisted foe that took advantage of his dulled reflexes and bloodied vision.

In the same manner that a blood-spattered Chavez was overwhelmed by Oscar De La Hoya in 1996, Barrera was admonished by the 22-year-old Amir Khan, with the Mexican warrior peering through a crimson mask while being engulfed by rapid combinations.

An accidental first round clash of heads opened a severe wound on the 35-year-old Barrera's left temple and the cut bled profusely until the ringside physician halted the bout in the fifth round. The nature of the stoppage meant the lightweight contest was determined by the three judges who voted unanimously for Khan by scores of 50-44 and 50-45 (twice) in front of a crowd approaching 20,000 at the MEN Arena in Manchester.

Even before the cut occurred, Khan's physical advantages were telling. His unequivocal swiftness and naturally bigger frame posed Barrera problems from the opening bell and when the gash appeared, the event became an opportunity for Khan to demonstrate the newfound defensive discipline he has acquired from his LA training camps with Freddie Roach.

Khan was eager to eradicate the recklessness that saw him knocked out by Breidis Prescott six months ago and floored by lesser foes earlier in his burgeoning career. Each time he unleashed a combination at the stationary Barrera, he would immediately draw back his hands and retreat to a safe distance.

"Freddie has just changed me as a fighter," said Khan, 20-1 (15 KOs). "This was make-or-break for me. I trained to hit and move, be sharp, be careful and be patient."

Khan was probably a little too cautious at times, as it seemed that a sustained barrage of sweeping blows would probably have drawn the referee's intervention. But the Briton cannot be reprimanded by taking a risk-averse approach given the apparent fragility of his punch resistance.

Khan's promoter Frank Warren, who himself has been accused of overly-protecting his brightest fighters, made this matchup because he knew that all the advantages lay with his protégé.

"I believe in Amir and I'm pleased he kept his discipline and composure and showed he could box," stated a relieved Frank Warren, who was standing at ringside warning at Khan to "move, jab, jab!" after just 20 seconds of the fight.

In addition to his physical superiority, Khan was aided by the direction of Roach, who twice

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guided Manny Pacquiao to victories over Barrera, and the knowledge that the Mexican's preparations for Saturday's fight were disturbed after he incurred a deep cut in a supposed tune-up bout on January 31st.

Barrera's only opportunity at victory would come if he could rattle the neophyte and expose the psychological frailties that must still be lingering in his psyche after the 54-second demolition by Prescott. But the solubility of Khan's chin was never tested, save for a glancing left hook that brushed Khan's head in the second round.

Resolve was never going to be enough for Barrera, as the disparity in height and reach meant he could never broach Khan's newly tightened guard. But the three-weight world titlist displayed the admirable quality in abundance, defying the blood that was evidently dropping into his eye by telling the doctor that it was not disturbing his vision during an inspection in the fourth round.

Built in the mould of Chavez, a great fighter like Barrera will never seek an avenue for exiting an obviously fruitless endeavour such as Saturday's bout, nor will he admit defeat when the outcome is not concussively conclusive.

"They should have stopped the fight in the first round because the cut was so big. I would have won this fight if I had two eyes," claimed Barrera, 65-7 (43 KOs). "I couldn't see with the blood. I didn't feel his punches."

Barrera arrived in the UK with a 40-strong entourage and had no intention of disappointing them. When he entered the ring he stood firm in the one spot in his corner, complete with a stern expression that contrasted the relaxed demeanour he has adopted ahead of many of his biggest fights.

But from bout's onset he was immediately forced into retreat as Khan's reach and speed seemed to bemuse Barrera. The collision of heads visibly shook Barrera and the severity of the cut was instantly apparent. Khan escaped with a minor nick above his left eye and wasted little time in bullying Barrera towards the ropes.

Khan's improved movement and higher guard were maintained throughout, and while he put little weight into his punches, their velocity was enough to perplex his opponent.

The profuse bleeding from Barrera's forehead could have signalled an earlier end to the contest, but given the magnitude of the event in the UK and a pay-per-view audience, the referee and physician allowed it to continue until 2:36 of the fifth.

"[Khan] followed the game-plan perfectly," said Roach. "He'll be my next world champion for sure."

The circumstances of the bout may have flattered Khan's ability, but they did little to mask the depth of Barrera's decline.

In the chief-support bout, Ola Afolabi turned in a display of crafty, unconventional boxing to

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score an upset with a stunning knockout of Enzo Maccarinelli. A wild counter right hand to the jaw poleaxed the 1/20 favorite Maccarinelli in the ninth round of the cruiserweight contest.

The Freddie Roach-trained Afolabi has a reputation for taking a lax approach to prizefighting, having amassed just 18 bouts in his seven year professional career. And he appeared to take that attitude into the ring, resembling an even lazier version of his old sparring partner James Toney, a fighter not exactly renowned for a diligent work ethic

But Afolabi, 14-1-3 (6 KOs) appears to have adopted many of Toney's slick defensive moves, frustrating the heavy-hitting Maccarinelli with deft upper-body movement. The LA-based Londoner was inactive for much of the contest, habitually leaning on the ropes, but whenever he landed cleanly on Maccarinelli the Welshman would momentarily freeze, as if taken aback by Afolabi's power.

Maccarinelli appeared to grow increasingly frustrated by Afolabi's quirky movement and abandoned the jab in favor of wide hooks and uppercuts. But as the fight progressed Maccarinelli grew visibly wearier, leaving himself open for Afolabi's right hook.

Maccarinelli, 29-3 (22 KOs), was considering his future after the bout and having suffered devastating knockouts to David Haye and journeyman Lee Swaby, his days as a contender have probably ended.

Conversely, Afolabi has crashed the 200-pound title scene and possesses the natural talent to contend with any top-level fighter. Maintaining focus will be another challenge, though.

Roman "Rocky" Martinez utilized his powerful left hand to rip the WBO version of the super-featherweight title from Nicky Cook. A crushing left uppercut landed squarely on Cook's jaw in the fourth round, sending the Briton crumpling to the canvas. Cook, 29-2 (16 KOs), looked shaken and barely beat the count, but a subsequent left hook from Martinez saw him collapse to the floor, prompting the referee to stop the contest at 2:20 of the round.

Cook, whose only previous defeat was to featherweight titlist Steve Luevano, seemed the better-rounded fighter over the first three rounds, mixing his attack to the head and body and rattling Martinez with a sharp left hook near the end of the second.

But the Puerto Rican remained composed and methodically stalked his foe, with the constant threat of his heavy left hand forcing Cook into retreat in the fourth. The 26-year-old Martinez, 22-0-1 (13 KOs), has been brought along slowly by his handlers, but against Cook he showed a marked improvement in poise and technique, waiting for openings before unleashing his power punches. He already holds points victories over Francisco Lorenzo and Jose Luis Soto Karass, and figures to develop into a major player in the 130-pound division.