

After The 'Lightning' Strike, What's Left Behind, What's Ahead

Written by Ron Borges

Saturday, 04 April 2009 19:00

The instant Antonio Pitalua buckled from the first big right hand Edwin Valero nailed him with Saturday night it was easy to see who the big winner was going to be last weekend. But Valero was not the only winner, not even in the lightweight division where he managed to unify half the major belts at 135 pounds in less than four minutes and elevate himself to the top of the division's list of names alongside Juan Manuel Marquez.

Valero was a fighting legend from the days when boxing was broadcast on the radio and that mystery was only enhanced by what he wrought when he finally reappeared to the American public Saturday night. Because of a problem with a brain scan exam, the WBC lightweight champion has not fought in the United States since 2003. Suspended by the state of New York, he could not get a license to box anywhere in America so he traveled to Japan, Europe and South America, knocking out victim after victim without being seen by anyone but the locals.

Edwin Valero was someone you just heard about. You heard about the string of knockouts and the bad brain scan and the peripatetic life he had to live to ply his violent trade but you never saw him and so your mind wandered and images of Godzilla grew.

Even his promoter, Bob Arum, admitted the first time he'd seen Valero fight was Saturday night in Austin, Tx., the only state in the union now willing to license him. What he saw confirmed that growing myth that Valero was more than a man, more than a fighter. He was a force.

That's the kind of legend that used to build by word of mouth back in the days before television. In those days you either saw a fighter live or you didn't see him at all... and so your imagination took you wherever you wanted to go, often creating a monster in your mind...at least until they were exposed.

No one in the U.S. had seen Valero fight in more than half a decade but boxing fans knew he was 24-0 with 24 knockouts. Even if you didn't know exactly who he was knocking out or how he was doing it, you saw the numbers and thought...well...who knows what you thought?

Then BOOM! Pitalua was down twice and then stopped when referee Laurence Cole (don't they have another referee in the entire state of Texas but Laurence Cole?) jumped in at :49 of round two to end what was nothing short of assault and battery on pay-per-view. With the raising of Valero's hand a star, at least for the moment, was born.

How big a star only time and a tough night or two against guys who can expose his obvious defensive flaws like Marquez or Manny Pacquiao will tell but until then Edwin Valero is a hot commodity in a hot division. A scalding hot commodity.

Yet on the same card another lightweight was resurrected so it was not just Valero who prospered over the weekend. So did the flawed but fearless Michael Katsidis, who came to Austin and beat up former champion Jesus Chavez until Chavez's cornermen stopped the fight

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after the seventh round.

No one is deluded enough to think Katsidis belongs at the top of the lightweight division but he is colorful, relentless, powerful enough to have sent Joel Casamayor through the ropes and onto his back on the ring apron before being stopped by him and that alone would recommend him for another big fight in the division off the Chavez victory.

Katsidis suffered back-to-back losses to Casamayor and Juan Diaz (via split decision) and so needed to be seen in a better light just as Valero needed to be seen, period. Now both have been and it will be intriguing to see which one prospers next.

Arum was already beating the drum for a showdown between Valero and Marquez, who is widely viewed as the best lightweight in the world and the second best fighter pound-for-pound behind his nemesis, Pacquiao. Marquez's focus, however, is on a third fight with Pacquiao after the latter finishes his May 2 business with Ricky Hatton so Valero will very likely have to wait.

But if that does not come off in a timely fashion, and Arum will have much to say about that, Marquez will need other options and one could be Valero, although it was interesting that when Arum spoke of a Valero-Pacquiao bout he said he needed to build up Valero more in the eyes of the American public but in the same breath called out Marquez.

The latter seems unlikely to happen soon because Golden Boy Promotions, who handle Marquez's business, desperately wants the income from a third fight with Pacquiao with the winner perhaps fighting Valero. Golden Boy CEO Richard Schafer suggested as much but Arum wants the opposite because he handles Pacquiao as well.

In the end, this may all be good for Katsidis and for former lightweight champion Juan Diaz, who was stopped by Marquez in his last outing. Certainly a Valero-Katsidis fight would be a slugfest for as long as it lasts, which wouldn't be long. Both have flawed defenses and power, although as Valero said after his victory there is power and then there's his kind of power. The kind Don King would call, "double shock power."

"No man can take my punch," he said after the 39-year-old Pitalua (46-4, 40 KO) proved he could not. "This is the beginning of big things for me."

Not for long if he doesn't learn to keep his chin down, his hands up and his mouth closed instead of hanging open. Make those kinds of mistakes against Marquez or Pacquiao and you very likely will pay dearly for them. Then again, who knows what would happen to either if hit solidly by Valero?

All we know is thus far he's hit 25 guys and all went to sleep. As batting averages go, that makes you Babe Ruth squared. Time will tell where this goes next but Valero vs. Katsidis or Juan Diaz both seem more likely for now than a match with Marquez.

The one lightweight contender who went in the opposite direction of Valero and Katsidis last weekend was former champion Julio Diaz. Diaz was in a crossroads fight at 29 with Rolando

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Reyes on the same “lightweight Lightning” card and for him the lights went out.

This was a fight Diaz desperately needed to win to get himself back into the lightweight equation but he was stopped at 2:17 of Round 5 after going down twice. While these days in boxing fighters can seemingly come back from almost any disaster, the devastating nature of the way Diaz lost probably short circuited his days as a contender.

Which brings us back to Valero, whom Arum said was now, “The best lightweight in the world.” That seemed a stretch but this was a night for bombast as well as bombs away.

“I would love for Juan Manuel Marquez to step up to the plate,” Arum said. “If he wants, we’ll go to Mexico.” Sure he will, because Valero can’t be licensed anywhere else in the U.S.

Whatever happens next, an interesting shake out is nearly upon us in the 135 pound division with Valero most likely ending up facing Juan Diaz while Katsidis, if he’s lucky, could end up with someone like England’s Amir Khan, who beat up an aged Marco Antonio Barrera last month in England to advance his career without taking much risk.

Katsidis-Khan and Valero-Diaz would be two compelling fights because both Khan and Katsidis can punch but have telltale defensive flaws while Valero against Juan Diaz would be an interesting contrast in styles with the power punching Valero trying to stand up to Diaz’s high work rate, superior ring generalship and iron will.

How it all will work out is unclear at the moment. What is clear is that Juan Manuel Marquez intends to wait for Manny Pacquiao’s next move, Michael Katsidis is back in line for a bigger fight with anyone who will have him, and Edwin Valero is a mystery no longer.

That alone is a pretty good weekend’s work.