

## More Merchant: Larry On The Importance Of Arreola

Written by Michael Woods  
Wednesday, 08 April 2009 19:00

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Some of us have a hard time getting excited about Chris Arreola.

The California heavyweight hasn't been paired up with a foe above the B- class to this point, and even more worrisome is the Mexican-American's inclination to come into the ring much heavier than he should be.

Arreola is on the cusp of securing a meaningful money fight, and yet he has been having trouble bearing down, and getting into tip-top condition. After weighing in at a reasonable 239 pounds to fight Chazz Witherspoon in June 2008, he inexplicably tipped the scale at 258 ½ pounds three months later when gloving up against Carlos Garcia. He heard it from his corner for sending a message that he has road work and nutrition issues. So one would think that for his next fight, in November 2008, Arreola would get the message, and pare down that midsection. Not really—"The Nightmare" came in at a too-generous 254 pounds, and nearly gave his team an aneurysm when Travis Walker whacked him around in the first round and knocked him to the mat in the second round before he got down to business and took out Walker in the third.

TSS isn't trying to go overboard in the criticism. We do concede that it isn't easy winning 25 bouts in a row, even if your opponents aren't a murderous row of pugilists. And we of course duly note that the point of the exercise is to stay on your feet long enough to do more damage than the other guy, and Arreola showed ample heart in getting to his feet, and scratching back against Walker.

TSS will be watching with a little extra intensity when Arreola takes on Jameel McCline on the undercard of the Winky Wright-Paul Williams tussle on HBO on Saturday night. That's because McCline, even at this advanced age—he turns 39 on May 20---and diminished capacity (he lost three straight, to Nico Valuev, Samuel Peter and John Ruiz before getting a W against Mike Mollo last November) is probably still better than a B- heavyweight. And in this Bronze Age of heavyweights, his imposing presence, and coordination even brings him to the B+ range in his best rounds. So a win over McCline will get me a step closer to believing that Arreola has a sliver of a chance to do anything against the inelegant but effective Klitschkos.

But there are those out there that are considerably more sold on the 6-4 Californian, who turned 28 on March 5. Or, if not sold, let's say slightly more disposed to investing significant principal, in the form of hope and expectations. Larry Merchant, for example, admits that he's more jazzed for the Arreola-McCline faceoff than he is the Williams-Wright match.

"Arreola is the one who holds my interest," said Merchant in a phoner. "Because the US hasn't produced a serious heavyweight product since Riddick Bowe."

I expressed some surprise at Merchant's excitement level, since I am more curious to see how Long Tall Paul fares against the defensive wizard Winky Wright. So Merchant explained his reasoning, after I wondered aloud if he was more of a heavyweight hound than I'd realized.

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“I love the lighter weight fighters,” he said. “But the notion of a heavyweight Oscar De La Hoya is appealing, if that’s what we get.”

Hey, just because I have been swayed more by what I haven’t seen from Arreola, I’m not in the Rush Limbaugh vein. He wishes for our President to fail. I don’t root against Arreola to validate my gut instinct. I too hope he’s the goods, and that we aren’t overrating his talent because the class of prospects and contenders is so dreadful.

In other time periods when the heavyweight division has been in the dumps, Merchant said, lighter weight standouts like Hagler, Hearns and Leonard have more than ably picked up the slack. Tony Canzoneri, Mickey Walker and Barney Ross did the same in the 1930s. But with boxing existing as a niche sport, “almost as a cult,” the HBO analyst said, it is even more important for a heavyweight horse to gallop ahead of the pack of American stallions. “A dynamic US heavyweight at this time would be important,” he said.

If Wladimir Klitschko handles David Haye in June, he’s next slated to meet his IBF mandatory, Alexander Povetkin. Arreola could be next in line after that, HBO’s poet laureate said. Or, perhaps a tangle with Vitali Klitschko could materialize, though Vitali is most interested in a title fight with Valuev, who holds the WBA strap. (Stay tuned for a TSS chat with Vitali next week.) Merchant hopes that if given that opportunity, Arreola fares better than the recent slate of Americans who impersonated week old roadkill against Wlad: Rahman, Thompson, Brewster and Austin all stunk out the joint when beefing with Baby Brother K.

I am dubious, but no Limbaugh, I reiterate: I hope Arreola is slim come the weigh in, in fighting trim, and has embraced the opportunity that is at his fingertips. If he can beat McCline, he will have elevated himself to a whole ‘nother level of earning power. So far, he hasn’t shown that he gets the stakes, that he wants, needs, demands a graduation to that neighborhood. His comment to David Avila about being bored in Big Bear didn’t indicate to me that he’s truly dialed in, and gets what it means to be a 24-7 professional, and understands the need to reduce the carb loading going into his bouts, so he is able to move his feet and torso enough to be an adequate defender. But as an unabashed heavyweight homer, I hope Arreola is all his backers and fans say he is.

Merchant thinks Williams has the edge going into the Wright battle. His age edge (27 to 37) and higher level activity (this is Williams’ fifth fight in 14 months, Wright’s third bout in a 34-month span) should help LTP against the Floridian. But, Merchant noted, vets have shown they aren’t ready for the rocking chair in recent months: Hopkins and Mosley both flipped the bird at popular notions of what a late 30s or 40-something fighter could and should do. A lesson in pugilism by wily Winky wouldn’t surprise TSS in the least, though we think LTP is ready to wrest the torch, and graduate to the upper tier with other PPV driving fighters.

Merchant did watch the Ali-Frazier doc which unspools on HBO before the live bouts. He noted that the film is top heavy with the Frazier POV, which our own Ron Borges also noted in his review. “Frazier’s the one who seems to want to carry his bitterness to his grave,” Merchant said, ruefully. For the record, Merchant wasn’t in Manila for the third go between the legends. To his recall, he’d left the NY Post, and was between full-time gigs. He was living in California,

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and had just sold a screenplay, so he had some endeavors keeping him busy, and wasn't crushed that he didn't see the Thrilla live. He'd missed the Ali-Foreman classic on Oct. 30, 1974, after he was denied re-entry into Kinshasa for the rescheduled bout. Foreman had been cut in training, and all press went home while his face healed. Merchant had written some critical copy about Don King, and he thinks that King may well have requested that his presence wasn't welcome for the reset match. Merchant saw both events on closed circuit. He had the same reaction to all who have seen the Thrilla. He was amazed that these two slightly-past-their-prime hitters were killing each other.

Finally, Merchant is still thinking that Oscar won't fight again, and that the Golden Boy will tell all next week that he's done as an active fighter. We discussed the likelihood that he'd wave adios, because we haven't heard any rumors of Golden Boy negotiating an Oscar return. "I think against the right opponent, Oscar could still do well. But my guess is retirement," Merchant said.

Weigh in, TSS faithful, you kings of commentary, on the potential or lack thereof of Arreola, Williams-Wright and Oscar's April 14 announcement.