

When OSCAR Knew: I Did Start Getting Beaten Up By Sparring Partners

Written by Ron Borges
Tuesday, 14 April 2009 19:00

Oscar De La Hoya didn't know for sure what he was going to say Tuesday afternoon until his wife gave him the chance to say something other than what he knew he had to say. Only then was he positive he would do what had to be done.

"My wife asked me...she looked right in my eyes and asked me, 'are you sure? Are you sure you want to retire?'" De La Hoya said Tuesday night by phone from Los Angeles, where three hours earlier he announced he'd fought his last.

"Right there, when she opened the door to fight again, I didn't take it. It was a very emotional and difficult decision for me to make but I have come to the conclusion I am retired from being a fighter. Every time I mention it it reminds me this was my life for 32 years. It hurts me that I cannot compete at the highest level any more but when I step in the ring now it's not me. It's not the fighter people grew up watching."

That is how it always ends in boxing. An imposter takes over your body. He looks like you and he talks like you but he can't fight like you. You may think he can, and for a time he might survive somehow in a lesser form, but then the night comes. A night like De La Hoya experienced last Dec. 6. A night when suddenly it is all gone and you find yourself standing helpless, a renter in a place you once owned – the middle of a boxing ring.

That is where De La Hoya found himself the moment the first bell rang and Manny Pacquiao began what would turn into an eight-round assault on a shadow of who De La Hoya once was. Freddie Roach, who trains Pacquiao, had promised as much and Tuesday, for the first time, De La Hoya admitted he had feared the worst himself.

In a tuneup fight several months earlier, De La Hoya had won every round against a former 130-pound champion for a minute named Steve Forbes but he came out of the ring that night looking like he'd been attacked by a swarm of hornets. His face was as bruised as it had ever been, damage done by a guy who everyone knew could not punch.

Roach knew what that meant. So did De La Hoya, yet he took the long walk from the locker room to the ring one more time, just to be sure. In a sense, Manny Pacquiao did Oscar De La Hoya a violence-laced favor that night for a half hour after he walked down that aisle at the MGM Grand Garden Arena De La Hoya had no doubts and no delusions any more. It was over.

"The first sign I felt, and I didn't want to accept, was with the (Floyd) Mayweather fight," De La Hoya said. "I felt that was the beginning of me not having it any more. Probably the second half of that fight. At the time you don't want to accept it. You lie to yourself.

"Then against Forbes I got him like no tomorrow. That was a clear sign to me. The Pacquiao fight was icing on the cake. I did feel things weren't right in training camp. I did start getting beaten up by sparring partners. That never happened ever, ever in my life – getting beaten up

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by sparring partners. I didn't want to accept it. I was lying to myself but I kind of had a hunch something was wrong. Maybe I'm not going to beat him.

"Yes, I did lose in a devastating way to Pacquiao. Yes people never imagined that would happen. But things happen for a reason. It made the decision that much easier."

Easier but not easy. As he addressed a large crowd across the street from the Staples Center in downtown Los Angeles, barely a mile or two from the barrio where he grew up in East L.A. and first learned to box at the age of five, De La Hoya needed barely six minutes to announce he was through. It was the longest six minutes of his life.

Yet as sure as he says he is about the rightness of his decision, De La Hoya choked up when talking about how his father first took him to the gym and supported his career from the start to its finish. It seemed like he was bewildered a bit that it had come to this, that the Golden Boy from East L.A. who won Olympic gold in 1992 in Barcelona was now no longer either a boy or a boxer.

"I needed that perfect excuse," De La Hoya said. "I was searching for that perfect exit strategy. How do I retire? What will it take? Us athletes are very stubborn. We never know when enough is enough. I can make any excuse I want (for being stopped by Pacquiao) but ultimately...I believe the time is now. It's over."

The difficulty with which De La Hoya said those words despite the reality of their accuracy was clear in his halting voice. The pain of giving up the arena he had so long dominated as the most popular fighter of his time was written on his still unmarked face. It may be time to go but that doesn't mean you really want the party to end.

De La Hoya admitted part of the reason he was retiring at 36 was because he had built a life outside of boxing to fall back on. Golden Boy Promotions is the most powerful promotional company in the sport and around it he and CEO Richard Schaefer have added an array of other businesses – real estate holdings, Spanish-language newspapers, RING magazine, development property, a fledgling Latino-based bank and credit card operation, endorsement deals – that not only have set him up well financially but also emotionally.

Yet while he admitted having other places to hang his hat had something to do with the decision to stop boxing, "it's not the primary reason." The primary reason was also the primal one. In a world of savage young lions, Oscar De La Hoya was no longer able to survive.

That has happened to every great fighter there ever was, including the greatest of all-time. Sugar Ray Robinson had more than one night like De La Hoya's with Pacquiao. Muhammad Ali had 10 after his savage third fight with Joe Frazier and the fallout has left him speechless and severely impaired by Parkinson's, a disease that has many fathers but in Ali's case had only one – boxing long after the fight had been beaten out of him.

De La Hoya well knows that sad history of fighters retiring at 36 and coming back a year or two later, unable to live without the call of the arena and the shouts of the mob in their ears. They

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come back to a sport they love but which no longer loves them and are jilted again.

The fall is harsher that time. More demeaning. Often more savage, although that would be difficult after what Pacquiao did to him. It is a scene De La Hoya not only has seen but has been a part of for he was the young man who destroyed his idol, Julio Cesar Chavez, 13 years ago when the roles were reversed.

Chavez was, like most great champions, blind to his slow decline. He did the same thing De la Hoya did last year. He lied to himself until the side of his face was ripped open and pouring out his own blood. Then he could lie no longer but it was too late.

That, Oscar De La Hoya insists, is what he wants to avoid. Not so much the beating, for he has been in the hurt business a long time and well understands what comes with it. It is not about the pain of losing either. It's about the humiliation of not being what you used to be.

"This is the love of my life," De La Hoya said. "Boxing is my passion. Boxing is what I was born to do. When I can't do it any more, when I can't compete at the highest level, it's not fair (to go on). It's not fair to me. It's not fair to the fans. It's not fair to nobody.

"Now I understand why athletes have such a tough time retiring from something that you feel so passionate about. From your sport that you're always thinking you can try one more time. You're always thinking you don't want to let no one down. I can still train. I can still compete but when you're an athlete that has competed on the highest level for a lot of years, it's not fair to step inside the ring and not give my best. When your body doesn't respond, there's nothing you can do about it."

Yet when you are 4-6 in the 10 biggest fights of your life and have gone 8-6 in your last 14 fights after beginning your career 31-0, walking away is easier to think about than to do. De La Hoya retires having won 10 world titles in six different weight classes, yet his critics will insist he was not even the best fighter of his era despite having grossed a record-setting \$696 million in 19 pay-per-view fights. That is a record of financial dominance that eclipses even the two best heavyweights of his time, Mike Tyson and Evander Holyfield, as well as anyone else who has ever doubled up his fists to face another man for wages.

De La Hoya knows, however, that while he is one of the best fighters of his time and the greatest box office draw in boxing history, he fell short in his biggest moments, losing to Felix Trinidad, Shane Mosley twice, Bernard Hopkins, Mayweather and Pacquiao. Few would deny those were the best six fighters he faced in a career in which he never avoided a soul. Some will point out that any fair thinking person knows he beat Trinidad and is pretty sure he split with Mosley but the record book doesn't say that and it never will.

It says 0-6 and so he must live with it. Frankly, he can and not simply because he is the richest boxer in history or was for most of his career the man who kept his dying sport alive. At a time when boxing is seldom written about even in the sports pages in America, De La Hoya became a PEOPLE magazine cover and a couch guest of Oprah. He was a regular on Leno and the author of a best-selling autobiography. He was the savior of his sport.

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During his 17 year career, Oscar De La Hoya was not the best boxer of his time but he WAS boxing. He was the handsome face of it and the financial engine that drove it. Tuesday he said he's proud of that unrivaled popularity that sprang from not just his ability to fight but also his ability to fight without looking like a fighter or acting in the way some people expect a fighter to act.

"I wanted to retire like a champion," De La Hoya said. "That was the plan. But I'm sure I made the right decision. I'm not going to fall into the trap (of fighting one more time) because once you fall into that trap there's no way out."

And so he went out perhaps in a style that fit him best. He didn't leave the ring in a robe or the arena with an ice bag on his swollen jaw and stitches above his eye. Oscar De La Hoya went out in an expensive business suit, a boxer no more.