

## What Time Is It? No Longer Macho Time

Written by Bernard Fernandez  
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Among the many things I can't believe is the Pet Rock fad of the 1970s and how CEOs of failed corporations can walk away with eight- and even nine-figure bonuses while tens of thousands of those corporations' employees are being laid off and/or having their pensions slashed. Many of those fortunate enough to remain in the work force are being required to accept deep pay cuts and reduced health benefits.

Also on the list of things I can't believe is that Hector "Macho" Camacho, who turns 47 on May 24, is still gainfully employed as a professional prizefighter, or that his most recent bout was offered as a pay-per-view attraction.

Like the dandelions and crabgrass that irritatingly pop up on our lawns every spring, it seems the Macho Man, even in severe career decline, is impossible to eradicate. You can arrest him, suspend him and evict him, but like those pesky weeds now shooting up in America's flower beds, he inevitably makes another appearance when you least expect it.

Or maybe we *should* expect it. Boxing's senior practitioners never really die, metaphorically speaking, especially with a lack of fresh, exciting talent coming along to speed their demise. They just fade away very, very slowly, like the old soldier in Gen. Douglas MacArthur's farewell address at West Point. Oh, sure, 44-year-old Bernard Hopkins still has the goods to rank among boxing's pound-for-pound elite, but do we really need the continual recycling of Camacho? Of Evander Holyfield? Of Ray Mercer? Right now in a theater near you, there is even a documentary in which Mike Tyson, no longer an active fighter but as omnipresent as smog in Los Angeles, recites his thoughts as to why he is like he is.

If you want nearly two hours of convoluted logic, "Tyson" is as far out as anything seen on the big screen since 1967's "The Trip" starred Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper, pre-"Easy Rider," as a couple of drug-addled hippies in a celluloid LSD haze.

In case you missed it – and I'm guessing you probably did – Camacho (79-5-3, 38 KOs) and 37-year-old Yory Boy Campas (92-14-1, 74 KOs) fought to an eight-round draw Saturday night in Orlando, Fla., in a PPV fight that ran opposite the HBO Championship Boxing offering of IBF light heavyweight champion Chad Dawson against former 175-pound titlist Antonio Tarver. Dawson won a clear-cut decision over Tarver, 40, in a marginally improved version of their first clash, on Oct. 11, which was televised by Showtime.

At first blush, fight fans who hold out hope of higher standards in their flagging sport might wonder why Dawson-Tarver II received the exposure that it did. By all accounts, ticket sales at the Hard Rock in Las Vegas were tepid at best and probably worse than that. Fewer than a thousand face-value tickets were said to have been purchased, and any seats that were filled beyond that scrawny number were probably occupied by fannies that gained entrance via a whopping discount or on freebies. It wouldn't be the first time a boxing promoter (Gary Shaw in this instance) has papered the house for aesthetic purposes.

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At least there are quasi-legitimate reasons for why Dawson-Tarver II, a rematch hardly anyone was clamoring for, came about. First and foremost, there was a rematch clause in the original contract that mandated that Tarver, then the IBF and IBO 175-pound champ, get first dibs at “Bad Chad” if he lost. It can be argued that rematch clauses are one of the more insidious causes for the erosion in boxing’s popularity, along with too many alphabet titles, too many weight classes, the near-total absence of free, over-the-air TV dates, the forced granting of options would-be challengers are obliged to sign over for a shot at some promoters’ champions and, of course, the insanity of an organization like the WBA reasoning that the public will accept “super,” “regular” and “interim” titlists in the same weight class.

But HBO, which has rejected bouts that, in theory, were at least as appealing as Dawson-Tarver II, went along with the Rematch We All Could Have Done Without. The pay-cable giant’s boxing operation has always showcased its stable of actual or would-be superstars, the idea being that fans will settle for big names if they can’t always get big fights. But the retirements of Oscar De La Hoya and Arturo Gatti, the deterioration of Roy Jones Jr. and the inevitable aging of Hopkins have seen many of the old reliables ushered out or nearly so, opening the door for Manny Pacquiao and, maybe, Dawson to step up and partially fill the void. Pac-Man is the real deal, of course, and Floyd Mayweather Jr. is returning to action, and none too soon by HBO’s reckoning. But the HBO roster is still a bit thin. Kelly Pavlik was exposed by Hopkins, Shane Mosley is still pretty good but not getting any younger, and Antonio Margarito, who had finally made it onto HBO’s radar, got caught with loaded hand wraps and is as radioactive to fight fans as Mark McGwire is to Baseball Hall of Fame voters.

The movers and shakers at HBO – Sports Division president Ross Greenburg, senior vice president Kery Davis and PPV chief Mark Taffet – don’t always guess right. Remember when we were told that Prince Naseem Hamed would be what Pacquiao eventually proved himself to be? Remember the hype attached to the rapid rise and equally rapid fall of massive heavyweight Michael Grant? When you really get down to it, the suits at HBO are like general managers in baseball who hope to draft wisely, but, if that phenom of a prospect doesn’t quite pan out, there’s always the New York Yankees way: Throw money at the most attractive free agent.

Sometimes it works out for the Yankees and HBO, sometimes it doesn’t. Lefthanded pitcher CC Sabathia could become the next Whitey Ford (the Steinbrenners are hoping he will) or the next Carl Pavano (they’re praying he won’t), and good luck if pricey free-agent first baseman Mark Texeira, he of the eight-year, \$180-million contract, doesn’t start hitting soon.

Dawson apparently has been identified as a growth property by HBO, but he comes wrapped in a Yankee-like conundrum. Even if he’s as talented as some believe, he has yet to demonstrate he’s a ratings-grabber or ever will evolve into one. Maybe Dawson is, as HBO color commentator Max Kellerman mused, a B-plus fighter in a C weight class, which is to say a star but not a potential superstar.

However HBO’s gamble on Dawson pays off, or not, this much is sure: Dawson-Tarver II was a barn-burner when compared to the curious pairing of no-longer-prime-time players Camacho and Campas in Orlando. Once upon a time, this would have been an interesting matchup of

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boxer (Camacho) and puncher (Campas), but a Niagara's worth of water has flowed under the bridge since the Puerto Rican cutie and Mexican banger were at the top of their games. Camacho always utilized clutch-and-grab tactics as a component of his arsenal of tricks, but he once was a truly gifted fighter who compensated for his lack of pop with charisma, outlandish outfits and penchant for notoriety. Campas was never quite as accomplished, but he was a lunchbox type of fighter who always had that big punch to fall back on if nothing else was working.

That someone reasoned that John Q. Public was ready to lay down some of those dwindling dollars for Camacho and Campas to get it on defies rationality, but there you have it. Promoter Diane Lee Fischer struck a deal with the Trump Taj Mahal in Atlantic City to stage the show, and there was some mild interest in it despite the fact that the two headliners were a combined 84 years of age, Campas had lost four of his previous five bouts and Camacho had fought only once in 46 months. But, in a seashore town where reunions of Frankie Avalon, Bobby Rydell and Fabian still draw nostalgic crowds, apparently there were enough fans who remembered Camacho's most recent A.C. appearance, in which he sent the legendary Sugar Ray Leonard into permanent retirement with a fifth-round stoppage on March 1, 1997, to merit another comeback.

What's more, vastly popular Hall of Fame trainer Angelo Dundee, a longtime acquaintance of Camacho, had consented to work the Macho Man's corner. To gain maximum benefit from Dundee being in town, a "roast" of the 87-year-old icon was scheduled for the Friday night preceding the fight. A slew of boxing notables had committed to feting Dundee, and there was possibility The Greatest himself, Muhammad Ali, would jet in to honor his longtime trainer.

But, although Camacho passed his physical, that fact did not satisfy the curiosity of Aaron Davis, the former Kansas boxing commissioner who in November 2008 replaced Larry Hazzard Sr. as head of the New Jersey State Athletic Control Board. Davis wanted to see with his own eyes whether Camacho had anything left in his tank. And what he observed during a March 1 sparring session at the Atlantic City Police Athletic League gym apparently convinced Davis that Camacho was running on empty.

"I didn't feel his skills were up to the level they needed to be for him to be competitive," said Davis, who was more inclined to approve of what he had seen of Campas in the gym. "He sparred maybe seven rounds against two guys (locals Shamone Alvarez and Patrick Perez), and at no point of any round did he take control. He showed nothing, and this is a fighter with a reputation for being elusive, smart and quick."

Davis informed Fischer and Camacho that Camacho would not be allowed to fight in Jersey, but that Fischer could stage the remainder of the card if she so chose. She elected not to do so.

So, is this the end of Camacho down the shore? Will he go the way of the diving horse at the Steel Pier?

"Camacho can apply again," Davis said. "I'm not going to say he can never fight in New Jersey again. But he would have to go through the same procedure he did this time, and I or one of my

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deputy commissioners would have to see him spar again. Just passing a physical is not sufficient.”

Davis’ unilateral decision is reminiscent of then-New York boxing commissioner Ron Scott Stevens’ pulling the license of four-time former heavyweight champion Evander Holyfield after ‘Vander turned in a subpar performance in losing a 12-round decision to Larry Donald on Nov. 13, 2004, in Madison Square Garden. Hazzard also wielded his authority like a cudgel, once proclaiming that Meldrick Taylor couldn’t fight again in New Jersey because his skills had eroded to a dangerously low level.

A reasonable guess is that Camacho wouldn’t put himself up for a similar inspection in the Garden State, given the humiliation of being turned away, but then this guy is pretty much is resistant to the concept of being embarrassed. Hey, he once was pulled over by a cop in Florida for “doing the wild thing” in a convertible with the top down while being straddled by a pretty female passenger as he attempted to drive down a rural road. Talk about your moving violations.

Camacho downplayed that incident, as he did his arrest by cops in Gulfport, Miss., in January 2004 allegedly for attempting to burglarize an electronics store. He said he merely was trying to retrieve his own computer, which was in the store for repairs.

For years boxing’s paparazzi and gossip-mongers jumped on Camacho’s misdeeds with relish because he was still relevant in the ring. Camacho, in turn, welcomed the publicity, even when it seemingly was negative, because he is a natural showoff and narcissist. Who can forget the time in Reno when, at a dead-of-night weigh-in, he came in a few ounces overweight and decided to remove his only article of clothing, his underwear. “Now you womens look away if you don’t wanna see,” a smiling Camacho said as he stood in the altogether, without benefit of a towel held up in front of him, for any womens to see.

Now he is turned away from Atlantic City like a hobo, and his quick shift to Orlando didn’t elicit a stampede on the box office. His behavior still leans to the outrageous, but he no longer is relevant in the ring.

I’m not sure how anyone else feels about it, but I think it makes me sad. After all, we’ve already seen that Hector Camacho Jr. is no substitute for the original.