

## Israel Vazquez: Boxing Is Like A Drug To Me

Written by Ron Borges  
Saturday, 30 May 2009 19:00

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Israel Vazquez is finished as a super bantamweight champion but he believes he's far from finished.

If he was no one would blame him after the three nights of legalized assault and battery he engaged in with Rafael Marquez over a 12-month span, three nights of passionate brutality in which they knocked pieces off of each other that can never be fully reattached.

Until a week ago neither had fought since, both so damaged they simply could no longer safely ply their violent trade. But last weekend Marquez finally returned to boxing and Thursday Vazquez and long-time manager Frank Espinoza announced the California State Athletic Commission had at last cleared the WBC and RING Magazine super bantamweight champion to return to the ring after a 14-month layoff and three operations to repair the detached retina he sustained in his third encounter with Marquez, a fight so brutal it was selected Fight of the Year by the Boxing Writers Association of America.

Seldom is the Fight of the Year a boxing ballet. Almost always it is the kind of back-and-forth hand-to-hand combat that leaves blood on the floor and injuries inflicted from which it is not easy to recover. Now the 31-year-old Vazquez is about to embark on a journey of discovery but what he will discover is how high the toll he paid has been for those three nights of glorious bloodshed with a man who can never now be fully separated from him.

Always among fight fans it will be Marquez-Vazquez or Vazquez-Marquez. They are blood brothers now, joined by the damage they were willing to inflict on each other to take their measure.

"I think my body can take it," Vazquez (43-4, 31 KO) said of his planned fall comeback, possibly for a fourth time against Marquez. "I've always said I want to fight Marquez again. Hopefully we can get that fight. I'm very happy to be returning to do what I love to do.

"It's been a very tough year to be on the sidelines. It's been difficult to be outside the ring for so long but what happened, happened. In the long run it will be good for me."

That's unlikely. The question is how bad was it for the little warrior from Mexico who now resides in Huntington Beach, CA.? Will he be close to what he once was or will he be a shadow who looks like Israel Vazquez but who can no longer fight like him?

Not even Vazquez can know that now, a fact he didn't hide from while announcing his return to the harshest landscape in sports.

"I've reached a plateau where I can get the big fights," Vazquez said. "I wanted to continue my career. I missed training. It's part of my life.

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“I don’t think I suffered permanent damage (to his eye). I don’t worry about that. We’ll see what happens in the ring. I hope it doesn’t but there’s always that chance.”

Always that chance that so much damage has accumulated that he can never again be what he thinks he is or what we remember him as. If that’s the case it won’t only be because of the three wars with Marquez however. It will be from his knockout loss to Oscar Larios seven years ago and his bludgeoning victory over Jhonny Gonzalez in 2006 and all the pain and punishment he suffered in between before he and Marquez fought a trilogy Espinoza compared to the Ali-Frazier fights. Frankly, no one scoffed at the comparison.

Israel Vazquez is much admired for those three fights (of which he won two) because he has always willingly paid a high price for victory. To him, it is glory above all and whatever physical price he had to pay for it was paid willingly. But now, 31 years old and coming off a badly damaged right eye and a long layoff, he returns conceding that at least one thing has to change. His waist line.

“I would like to lose it (his super bantamweight titles) in the ring but it’s tough,” Vazquez said. “I can’t keep sacrificing my body to make 122 pounds.”

The WBC has already stripped Vazquez of its title because of the length of his layoff and the fact that no one was sure if he’d ever be cleared to fight again. RING magazine continued to maintain him as its champion, standing firm in their rule that a fighter must lose his title in the ring or relinquish it voluntarily.

Vazquez did the latter during the teleconference announcing his return last week when Espinoza told RING magazine editor Nigel Collins that, “This would be a good time to officially relinquish that belt. Its best for Israel to move up and let someone else fight for the 122 pound title.”

So now there is talk of a fourth fight with Marquez at 126 or perhaps one with young power puncher Juan Manuel Lopez, the undefeated WBO super bantamweight champion (25-0, 23 KO) who has called Vazquez out several times. Vazquez can make a decent and well-deserved payday with either or he can simply challenge WBC champion Takahiro Aoh, a promise made to him by WBC president Jose Sulaiman when he removed Vazquez’s hard-earned 122-pound championship for inactivity.

No matter what he does, people will watch and he will get paid. He has bled for the right to have both happen.

“We’re grateful for the support of Jose Sulaiman and the whole WBC family,” Espinoza said. “They didn’t know how long the layoff would be. They had to give someone else a chance but they told us Israel can comeback at any weight division and directly fight for a world title – 122, 126 or 130.”

Espinoza said the possibility of fighting Lopez is there, as is the obvious interest in another Marquez fight. A less dangerous tune-up fight is also a possibility depending on how Vazquez

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looks once he begins sparring again.

Whatever he decides, the fact he becomes a promotional free agent on June 5 will also work to his advantage because he can not only pit one promoter against another but also consider what kind of fights, and against whom, each is likely to deliver.

“Marquez has made comments he’s willing to fight Israel at 122 or 126,” Espinoza said. “He took his last fight at 126 so that won’t be a problem. Rafael really wants to fight Israel.”

Vazquez feels the same but he also looks with hungry eyes at young Lopez, knowing that he can either fight him or use him as leverage to push Marquez back into the ring. Whatever he decides, Vazquez knows if he can simply fight the way he once did they’ll all be there waiting for him.

“Lopez has wanted to fight me since the third Marquez fight,” Vazquez said. “It’s a fight we can do at some point but a fourth fight with Rafael is easier to make at this point.”

Easier, that is, until the fighting starts. Then there’s nothing easy about it regardless of what each of them has left. Of that, Israel Vazquez is quite sure.

“I got a chance to see him (comeback) fight,” Vazquez said. “He looked good. The opponent moved too much so it made it an awkward fight but he looked ready for a fourth fight.

“Maybe he slipped a little bit. He looked a little slower but he’s been out of the gym for quite a while. You’ll get to see if the layoff has affected me too.”

Regardless of whether it has dulled his reflexes or permanently damaged his skills, there is one thing the pain he went through after a year of fighting Rafael Marquez has not done. It has not lessened one bit his love for the brutal way he makes a living.

“I got the itch but not just from seeing Rafael fight,” Vazquez said. “Boxing is like a drug to me. If it was up to me I’d stay in boxing all my life.”

If he could, people would keep paying to watch him, too.