

Does Arreola Have A Chance?

Written by Ron Borges
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Cristobal Arreola is not the personification of The Great White Hope because he is neither great nor white. But today he is that stereotype's Hispanic-American cousin.

Arreola has become The Great American Hope, the man who may bring some portion of the heavyweight championship of the world back to this part of the world. This may say more about hope in America these days than it does about Arreola's boxing ability but we'll have to wait and see on that.

The fact is, the last time an American held some portion of the heavyweight title was three years ago, when Shannon Briggs briefly ended up with an interim piece of the World Boxing Organization belt. Truth be told, however, it was John Ruiz who last held a more legitimate portion of it when he won the World Boxing Association interim title by defeating former heavyweight champion Hasim Rahman.

Then again, some would argue there hasn't been a true American-born heavyweight champion since Rahman briefly held the title after knocking out the undisputed "Man" of the division, Lennox Lewis, in 2001. Or at least since Roy Jones, Jr. won it from Ruiz in one of the latter's several incarnations as WBA champion.

However you see it the fact is it seems like a century ago since America last ruled the heavyweight division so the announcement this week that the hard-punching, undefeated (27-0, 24 KO) Arreola will square off with World Boxing Council champion Vitali Klitschko (37-2, 36 KO) at the Staples Center in downtown Los Angeles on Sept. 26 comes as welcome news to some fight fans but dreadful news to others depending on where you stand on the rough-around-the-edges and soft-around-the-middle Arreola.

HBO Sports commentator Larry Merchant has had an almost inexplicable affection for Arreola for some time now, although he admits he's not always sure it's based on anything more than a hope. Whatever it's based on, these days Arreola may be the best we've got to offer up to try and stop the Russian invasion of boxing's most glamorous division with the brothers Klitschko holding 75 per cent of the titles between them and Nikolai Valuev, a Russian himself, wearing the WBA brand at the moment.

So when Klitschko's planned Sept. 12 title defense against former British cruiserweight champion David Haye fell through after Haye backed out of a handshake agreement to challenge Valuev instead, the towering Russian came looking for another opponent HBO would buy and quickly settled on Arreola, who has been on HBO before and is widely considered the top American challenger at the moment even though he has yet to be tested by anything resembling heavy iron.

That will change when he gets in with the 6-7, 255-pound Klitschko, who is ponderous to be sure but also powerful. How Arreola plans to get around Klitschko's pawing but problem causing

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long left jab is difficult to fathom and if he can't avoid it, it means he'll eventually be hit by some big straight rights behind it that may ask questions of Arreola's questionable chin that he does not have an answer for.

The one thing that bodes well is that Arreola is a brawler by nature and that could lure Klitschko into exchanges he would rather avoid if the big Californian can stand up to the champion's power. Arreola is no cutie, no runner, no grab and hold wrestler, no defensive genius. He is, to be frank, a less than elusive fighter who comes forward looking with one intention in mind – to separate you from your senses.

In the process, he accepts this might also happen to him, as it nearly did last November when Travis Walker nearly cold-cocked him. The fact that there is a need to write such a sentence to discuss Arreola's career in itself gives one reason to bet the chalk and lean toward Klitschko but it should be pointed out that Arreola, while out on his feet, was never out cold and by the third round had Walker out of commission. If he can do that to Klitschko, he becomes an overnight star, at least in the minds of those people who still pay attention to the heavyweight division.

It is that apparent punching power, which was most recently on display when Arreola stopped Jameel McCline in four rounds earlier this year, that gives the challenger the semblance of a chance in this fight. The question will be is it a real chance or just the often mythical "puncher's chance" that never seems to materialize when the fight starts and the talking stops?

No one can know this but Arreola and the people closest to him believe that while he may have a crude style it's one that can match Klitschko's. A while back, sitting in a southern California restaurant with a number of writers around, Arreola described his approach thusly: "I'm strong and I come to fight."

Though admirable traits and impressive on a street corner or in a local tavern on a Saturday night, there once was a time when that would not have been enough to win the heavyweight championship of the world. Today is a different story, which is why Chris Arreola has a chance to write his own story come Sept. 26.

It would be unwise to bet your children's college fund on it, but if he clips Klitschko a few times, who knows? These days that's all the hope it takes to be The Great White American Hope.