

Borges: Chris Arreola Not Ready For Prime Time

Written by Ron Borges

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You want to believe. If you have any love for boxing or of an underdog's story than you desperately want to believe. But, if you have eyes to see, you do not believe.

That is what heavyweight boxing in America has come to in this lowest of all nadirs. You no longer search for the Next Big Thing. You search only for a clone of Buster Douglas.

For Cristobal Arreola to defeat World Boxing Council heavyweight champion Vitali Klitschko Saturday night at Staples Center in Los Angeles would not require an effort like the one Douglas mustered the night he beat up 42-1 favorite Mike Tyson in Tokyo's Egg Dome. But the shock of seeing his hand raised would be similar. The only difference is a lot less people will be watching.

To say no one cares any more in the United States about the heavyweight division is to state the obvious. Partially this is because of jingoistic feelings of nationalism that find American fight fans turning away once the division began being overrun by a string of Eastern European belt holders like the Klitschko brothers, Nikolai Valuev, Ruslan Chagaev, Oleg Maskaev or young contenders Alexander Povetkin or Dennis Boytsov.

For ethnocentric U.S. fight fans it was bad enough when the giant Brit-Canadian-Jamaican citizen of the world Lennox Lewis, held the heavyweight title. But the recent parade of large but not largely talented East Europeans has left American fight fans both cold and disinterested. The latter, by the way, is far worse than the former and it is a result of the desultory nature of the majority of the victories by this string of Russian giants.

As a group they are easy to lose interest in, each making the other appear better only by the boring nature of their own performances. This recently led HBO analyst Larry Merchant to question his own enthusiasm for Arreola's talent and chances, conceding it may be based more on wishful thinking than on his undefeated 27-0 record with 24 knockouts. Worse, boxing philosopher and future Hall of Famer Bernard Hopkins explained the heavyweight division thusly last week while in Las Vegas: "We live in a microwave society," Hopkins said. "It ain't about the family sitting at home with grandma doing the cooking and you say you're hungry and your Mom says 'In an hour.' Now its hit some buttons and you got a four course meal.

"That's why fighters get knocked out so early. They don't have a chance to become that sweet peach on the tree. They get picked too soon. You taste that peach and it's bitter. It wasn't ripe.

"They're pushed by thieving, conniving promoters because they need to produce something that's not there yet. You got to have something to sell so what they sell is, 'Maybe he's a dark horse like Buster Douglas.' You got to make soup but you ain't got nothing. You know you got nothing but you still need soup so you boil some hot water and salt. You know you got nothing but now it's soup."

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In other words, the undefeated but untested Arreola, in Hopkins' opinion, lacks the experience and mastery of his craft to match Klitschko (37-2) and ultimately will pay a painful price for it. In short form, Hopkins was predicting the WBC title will stay in the Ukraine and Germany, where Klitschko was first born and now works even though he became a U.S. citizen and splits his time between Los Angeles and Hamburg, Germany.

Most athletes would have never gotten to the soup analogy because they wouldn't know an analogy from an analgesic but Bernard Hopkins didn't even break stride when someone said, "You mean he doesn't have a chance?"

"You're a doctor!" Hopkins said before adding that the heavyweight division, always so vital to the survival of boxing, was utterly moribund in the U.S., not that it matters any longer.

"People say in boxing if the heavyweight division is dead boxing is dead," Hopkins said. "It's not true. The biggest fights the last five years have been between 130-160 pounds. The focus now is not where it was.

"The body is off the head. The body is 130 to 168 pounds for the last five years. Boxing will always have its down points, like the stock market, but boxing will survive the heavyweight division, it will survive whether corruption lives or don't live, it will survive whether the Mafia running it or not.

"American sports fans don't give a crap about the Klitschkos. When it comes to getting that name brand you got to get sanctioned in the United States first and right now they're not embraced. It's not their fault they came along at a time when the heavyweight division is null and void but that's how it is today.

"This ain't nothing I'm proud of but at the end of the day their lack of popularity isn't about the recession. It's that nobody cares about the heavyweights."

Arreola, of course, hopes they'll care about him by around midnight Saturday. He believes they will because of a short but concussive business meeting with Klitschko on HBO. If he's right it will mean he found a way to do that which his talent has not hinted he's capable of, which is defeat one of the world's top heavyweights. If he's wrong, well, according to Hopkins no one will care any way.

This kind of disinterest has not been lost on Arreola, who seems like a pleasant enough sort. Neither has the realization that when he's not being ignored he's being disrespected by the larger sporting public in America.

"One thing that kind of bugs me," Arreola said this wee. "I feel like I've been taken lightly. I feel like they already think that it's a cakewalk. Now they already have a date for December. They can still fight in December, but it isn't going be for the world title, man.

"I'm gonna win it. I respect Mr. Klitschko. I respect him as a man and as a fighter, but inside the ring everything is outside the door and it's time to fight."

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This is, of course, what Arreola is not only supposed to say, it's what he is supposed to believe. Considering that he's not only undefeated but has only been forced to go the distance once (two victories by DQ in addition to his 24 knockouts), it is right and proper that Arreola think a lot of himself. The larger question is should he?

That is where the rubber meets the road and, frankly, where most people believe he'll meet his Waterloo.

"It's not gonna go far, plain and simple," he insists. "It's gonna be a knockout fight and it's gonna be an exciting fight. It's something in the heavyweight division that fans have been waiting a long time for.

"Vitali Klitschko has never fought anyone like me; someone that's willing to take a punch to give a punch, or someone that has a lot of heart and fights with emotions.

"There's always strategy going into a fight. You have to get inside the jab. You can't let him stretch his hands out and you go balls to the wall. You take the fight to him and make it a fight he's not used to.

"I'm gonna bring emotion as far as determination to win the title for Mexicans, Mexican-Americans and to keep the title out here in the United States."

If Chris Arreola can do that, he will have altered Bernard Hopkins' perception and probably heavyweight reality in the U.S. He will have become a Mexican-American version of Buster Douglas, an underdog with teeth from a country that seems to have ceded boxing's most important weight class to foreign invaders.

In all likelihood this will not come to pass. Arreola has never been in with a heavyweight as big or as experienced as Klitschko and say what you might about the champion he can punch when he lets that right hand go and his long jab is far more difficult to avoid than Arreola may know.

In addition, there has always seemed to be something missing with Arreola, something not quite serious about his fitness or his form.

"It bugs me to a point to hear that because they're just talking (about his conditioning problems)," he said. "He said-she said type of stuff. That bugs me. But, they need to come to the gym and check me out and watch me for themselves. They'll see what I'm doing and how hard I'm actually working. I just checked this morning and I'm already (2)59 so I'm already good right there. But it does bug me."

"The main thing for me has been the two-a-days (with strength and conditioning coach Daryl Hudson) and I cut out beer. I've just been eating right, a lot of vegetables and greens, chicken and fish and meats. Just the right amount for me. I have a ton of energy and feel great."

Saturday night he'll have to expend a lot of that energy to prove Bernard Hopkins is no prophet. If he does, Chris Arreola will soon profit. If he doesn't he won't feel great for quite a while.