

Good Friends Collide: Victor Ortiz & Antonio Diaz

Written by David A. Avila
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As a youth Victor Ortiz used to watch Antonio Diaz and his brother Julio Diaz on television and admired their super tough mentality and the way they applied their boxing skills against elite fighters.

“My brother and I used to pretend we were Antonio Diaz and Julio Diaz when we were kids,” said Ortiz who grew up in Kansas. “I never dreamed I would be fighting Antonio Diaz.”

Recently both Ortiz and Diaz have become friends. After Ortiz’ last loss, Diaz called him up for a pep talk.

“I just told him that things would get better,” said Diaz.

Life has a strange way of twisting things around.

Ortiz (24-2-1, 19 KOs) faces mentor and childhood idol “Tono” Diaz (46-5-1, 29 KOs) on Saturday, Dec. 12 at the UIC Pavilion in Chicago. The fight will be shown on HBO as part of a triple-header. Somebody has to lose.

“It’s strange huh?” said Ortiz.

Diaz had been retired for several years after an impressive career that included winning the IBA welterweight world title and beating several marquee fighters like Micky Ward, Ivan Robinson and Cory Spinks. But when he began helping brother Julio prepare for a fight by running with him, the pounds began sweating off quickly and he decided to try it once again.

“I weighed about 200 pounds,” said Diaz, 33, about his life outside of boxing. “I’m still young.”

Now trained by his older brother Joel Diaz in an Indio boxing gym, Antonio Diaz finds himself smack in the middle of one of the best boxing stables in the country. The others in his team include Timothy “Desert Storm” Bradley, brother Julio, Abner Mares, Dominic Salcido and others.

Antonio Diaz fits right in as a sparring partner, assistant trainer and mentor for the hot young fighters in the team. But when you mention Victor Ortiz there is a look of solace in his face.

“He’s a strong young fighter,” says Diaz with honesty. “He hurts his opponents.”

While working in the gym you can see that Diaz knows there won’t be many more opportunities if he loses.

“My experience is my strength,” Diaz said of his pending contracted fight at 144 pounds. “I’ll be the bigger and stronger fighter.”

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Meanwhile, in an immaculate gym located in a business district in Ventura, Ortiz pounds out punches with machine gun velocity. Each blow has that special sound that real power punchers possess. Kind of like the way a homerun hitter cracks the ball during batting practice. Each blast has concussive impact.

Despite being a power-puncher Ortiz worries about the small intricacies of his sport. Perfection and correctly performing each movement matter to him. The loss to Marcos Maidana last June in Los Angeles has made him understand that he needs to adhere to tactics and preparation.

“Antonio Diaz is a world champion,” said Ortiz, 22, who is still considered a hot prospect by many. “I know I’m in for a tough night.”

When Ortiz talks about Diaz it’s almost in reverential tones.

“Never thought I’d fight Antonio Diaz,” Ortiz says with a far away look. “It’s a great honor.”

But once Ortiz resumes his workout and pounds the mitts held by his trainer Daniel Garcia he emits a menacing sound after each blow. There is a foreboding presence that overcomes him like a blanket of darkness.

Garcia likes what he sees in his protégé.

“We’re prepared to deal with Diaz and his experience,” said Garcia. “But it is going to be a very hard fight.”

Diaz said the friendship that exists between them will not be an obstacle.

“Right after the (Marcos) Maidana fight I texted him (Ortiz) right away not knowing that it would be me he’s fighting next,” said Diaz with an almost sad look in his eyes before reverting back to a more stoic gaze. “After the fight, we’ll still be friends.”