Written by Ron Borges
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Of all the questions swirling around this weekend's fourth confrontation between Israel Vazquez and Rafael Marquez the biggest one is the simplest to state but most difficult to answer: Can they really do that to each other again?

The problem with rematches and even more so with third and fourth fights is that both fighters become acutely aware of what the other does and how he tries to do it but more significantly they become aware of the kind of damage each can inflict on the other.

Human nature being what it is, if you beat the tar out of each other in the way Vazquez and Marquez have in their trilogy of personal destruction, eventually it would seem logical to conclude a voice inside would whisper, "Enough already!''

Might that finally be the case Saturday night when they square off for a fourth brutal confrontation at the Staples Center in Las Angeles? Might those voices inside suggest they consider self-preservation this time rather than engaging in another brutal assault which if it occurred on the street would result in felony convictions?

No one can know this until the two are alone in the ring with each other again and that includes the fighters themselves. Surely Vazquez, a three-time world champion, and Marquez, a champion in two weight classes, believe they are willing to pay the steep price of doing to each other again what they did in their first three fights but once the pain is visited on them can they simply ignore that which they know will be required to win and press on at their own expense?

That no one knows the answer is one reason why people will watch. The other is that neither man was affected by such concerns the first three times they committed felonious assault, so why would they start worrying about their own health now?

"I think it surprised everybody with how great the first three fights were,'' said Vazquez (44-4, 32 KO). "No one expected them to be so great. We surprised everybody and we surprised ourselves.

"More than anything, we treated the fans. I still get stopped in the street and people say 'Hey, are you going to fight him again?' Or, 'When are you going to fight him again?' so I have to thank the fans because without them there wouldn't be a fourth fight.

"I have a lot of gratitude for the fans for sticking by me because I've been out for such a long time and there's still an interest in the fight.''

After winning the final two of the three back-to-back-to-back wars, Vazquez was so beaten up he has fought only once in the past 26 months after a 19-month layoff following the third fight while undergoing three surgeries to repair a damaged eye.

Marquez, who stopped Vazquez in the first fight, was himself stopped in the second and lost a bloody, hotly disputed split decision in the third when two of the judges scored the bout 114-111 in opposite directions while the third saw it for Vazquez by a single point, 113-112.

To add to the tight symmetry between these two sons of Aztec warriors, Marquez (38-5, 34 KO) also has fought only once in the past 24 months, needing a 14 month respite from boxing after the third fight to rekindle a fire that had all but consumed him in pursuit of victory.

Vazquez's one return was little more than a sparring session and it was another year before he reached the point where he feels again ready to face an opponent with whom he knows he will be linked for as long as men fight for money.

"It's going to be a great fight, just like the other three,'' Marquez insists. "It's going to be a spectacle. That's the kind of fights we make.''

The kind of fights they make seem like they belong in the Roman Colosseum because they are more gladiatorial confrontations than boxing matches. Each time they fought it was assumed the next fight could not possibly be as brutal but each exceeded its predecessor and now they are back for whatever follows a rubber match, each damaged goods to be honest but not so damaged that they are not ready to damage each other and themselves once again to entertain people's bloodlust.

"Someone once said to me when we were involved with the Gatti-Ward fights that we were part of history,'' recalled Golden Boy Promotions COO David Itskowitch. "I know we all get caught up in the details of promoting a show but one thing we should all do is sit back and realize we're part of boxing history with these fights.''

It is a bloody history to be sure, one now punctuated by so much familiarity that it seems there is nothing Marquez can think inside a boxing ring that Vazquez will not anticipate and vice versa.

That causes its own problems yet both feel, as they do with everything about facing each other, that they can handle those issues in the same way they will handle the pain they are again sure to inflict upon each other.

"We know each other very well,'' said Vazquez. "We know each other's strengths and weaknesses. It's our job to do what we have to do and it's our job to prevent the other guy from doing what they have to do. We're fighters.

"I've had big fights that have taken a lot out of me but I still feel good. That's why I'm still fighting.''

In the gym, they may both feel fine but neither looked like his old self in their one venture back into the ring. On those nights they just looked old.

This was especially true for Vazquez, who although he stopped journeyman Angel Priolo in the

ninth round by dropping him three times looked tentative and unsure of himself for long stretches.

Considering what Marquez and the size of his own heart have put him through that is understandable but if he is slow to react, or hesitant to engage, it could be a dangerously difficult night for a guy who is 32 years old on the calendar but far older than that in boxing years.

“I know his tendencies,’’ Vazquez said. “I know where to attack him from. But how will we hold up physically? How much did those past fights take out of us? These are the questions that will be answered.

“My motivation is to shut those naysayers’ mouths. They say I shouldn’t be fighting anymore. I want to shut their mouths and let them know I can still make great fights.’’

The story – and the questions - are much the same for Marquez, who claimed recently that the only difference between him now and when their trilogy began is that he is “more mature.’’ He may be more mature but he is not what he was when they started this long walk.

Whether he knows that or not he’s not saying but one thing about boxing is that all will be revealed and undeniable Saturday night.

“I still feel physically fine,’’ Marquez insists and he probably does. They both will…until about two or three minutes after the first bell echoes inside the Staples Center. Then it will all come back to them.

What they have done to each other.

What they are risking to do it again.

What they have left inside them once the leather begins to crash home and the pain and exhaustion wash over them with an odd familiarity.

Most of all, what will come back to them is the price the other will demand of him to win.

Not even they know what will happen after those realizations hit with the force of their punches but one thing is sure. Israel Vazquez and Rafael Marquez will give all they have left inside them to win.

How much that is, no one knows.