

## BORGES: Im Leaning Toward Vazquez

Written by Ron Borges  
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Rafael Marquez is convinced the world will see a different fighter when he meets Israel Vazquez tonight at the Staples Center in whatever follows a rubber match between two of boxing's greatest warriors.

He may prove to be right. He may not be happy that he is.

Marquez has lost the last two of the three bludgeonings between them after having stopped Vazquez in their first fight by leaving his right eye looking like someone had stuffed a softball under his eyelid. He was stopped himself in their second fight and the third was a nasty split decision loss in which both fighters left the ring as damaged goods.

The saving grace for Vazquez was he at least left as the WBC super bantamweight champion but Marquez had taken such a toll on him that he had to eventually relinquish the title anyway because he wasn't fit to defend it. Both men were diminished in the noble way great boxers sometimes are when they meet a mirror image of themselves.

The same was true for Micky Ward and Arturo Gatti, who beat each other up three times for money and left the ring by the end with a love for each other that was difficult to fathom unless you had once shared such a violent space with another man.

Now Vazquez and Marquez find themselves in the same situation but they are fighting for a fourth time and for only the second time in 26 months, each having been left so damaged by the other after the third fight that it is remarkable either of them is still in the ring.

Of course, that's the question. Will they really be in the ring tonight or will they just be shadows, faded memories of what they used to be? To his credit, Vazquez has acknowledged that such a possibility exists and that he cannot know how well he will fight this time until it is too late.

The one time he has fought since the third Marquez fight he did not look good. In fact, he looked tentative and wary, two very reasonable responses to what he has put himself through to face down Marquez twice.

Marquez, on the other hand, has almost refused to acknowledge the possibility he is less now than he was when they first met, even though the evidence is clear both historically and personally that it is the case. Several days before the fight in fact, Marquez promised with great bravado that, "There are no words to say. There are no introductions to make. Everybody knows us.

"But you are going to see a new, different Rafael Marquez on Saturday. I am extremely confident. My training camp was excellent. I think I am a better fighter than before."

No, Rafe, you aren't. You are not a better fighter than when this violent series began and

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neither is Vazquez. The difference is the latter has at least been able to acknowledge it.

After years around the sport one understands boxing is the game of self-delusion. No one would enter it if not able to convince themselves they are in a safe place when in fact they are walking through a dynamite field every time they enter the ring.

So on some levels it is to be expected that Marquez would take such a position. But the fact that he has been unable to acknowledge the obvious – that the price he and Vazquez have extracted from each other has left them both less than they once were – is both interesting and alarming. It is also why I am leaning toward Vazquez, even though he did not look good stopping journeyman Angel Priolo seven months ago at the Nokia Theatre across the street from the Staples Center.

That night Vazquez dropped Priolo three times in the ninth round before the fight was stopped. To say someone did not look good dropping an opponent three times before stopping him is both a measure of the talent and bravery Vazquez has shown in the past and a commentary on how wary he seemed.

Frankly, Marquez didn't prove anything stopping Jose Francisco Mendoza in Mexico a year ago either. The fact it has been a year since that fight tells you all you need to know, especially since there was a 14 month layoff after the third fight before he faced Mendoza.

Both these guys are vulnerable because of their pasts and because each has been stopped by the other. But in a fight like this understanding not only who your opponent is but who you are is paramount.

Vazquez has convinced me he does more than Marquez does, which is why in a fight that's difficult to pick because it is so filled with unknowns it just seems more likely that 32 year old Vazquez (44-4, 38 KO) will hold up better against his 35-year-old opponent.

Why? Perhaps because his expectations for himself are lower. He seems to admit what Marquez cannot, which is that they will be fighting with diminished resources tonight. The fighter who best adjusts to that, it seems, is the one who will have his hand raised at the end.

“(Saturday) is the biggest day of my life. With this fight, Marquez and I will definitely be part of boxing history, even more so than now. My motivation to win is like none I have had before. Mentally and physically, I feel like a new man.

“If Marquez is saying he is going to knock me out, he is making a big mistake. I am going to win this fight, no doubt about it. I can't say how, that's a mystery. But whether it goes the distance or ends early, I will be the winner again.