

## Ruiz Wants Title From Haye, Then A Klitschko

Written by Ron Borges

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Despite his pedestrian boxing style and low-key manner, there are some remarkable things about two-time heavyweight champion John Ruiz that would not immediately come to mind when his name is mentioned.

One is that he's fought for the heavyweight championship of the world 12 times, twice as often as the last New Englander to hold the title, Rocky Marciano, the only heavyweight champion to ever retire undefeated and stay that way.

Another is that he's fought for the heavyweight championship of the world more times than Jack Dempsey, Ezzard Charles, Jersey Joe Walcott or Riddick Bowe as well, and if he somehow wins the WBA portion of the belt back for a third time on April 3 at MEN Arena in Manchester, England he will join Muhammad Ali and his old nemesis Evander Holyfield as three-time heavyweight champions.

Appraised of these facts recently before beginning an early training workout at the squat South Boston Boxing Club, Ruiz's eyes widened and an almost embarrassed smile crossed his face. The 38-year-old former champion knew without anyone saying it what much of the boxing world would make of such connections. They would shake their heads as if such things were something for the relentless Ruiz to be embarrassed about.

Frankly, he is not but he understands the difference between himself and those fighters. He may be a historical footnote as the first Latino to ever win a portion of the heavyweight championship but there are footnotes and legends and he understands who is what.

"Those are legends in the sport," said Ruiz as he began the long process of preparing to meet recently crowned champion David Haye, the former unified cruiserweight titleholder with the big punch and bigger mouth. "I don't put myself up with them. I've been blessed to have that many title shots and still be around with a chance to win it again."

His 13th and probably final chance if he doesn't win comes against the power-punching Haye (23-1, 21 KO), a man who claims Ruiz's straight forward style is perfectly suited for his speed and powerful right hand. Time will tell but suffice it to say Ruiz does not look at their short-term future together in quite the same way.

"This is a good opportunity for myself," Ruiz (44-8-1, 30 KO) said. "His problems come against guys who stay on him and pressure him. That's what I do. He likes to move so I'll want to pressure him and make him fight. I guess we'll find out who's made for who."

If Ruiz were to win in his first fight working under the banner of Oscar De La Hoya's Golden Boy Promotions, it would likely open the door to a unification fight with one of the Klitschko brothers, two fighters he has always believed he would do well against. HBO, however, could not think of a bigger nightmare, a fact Ruiz long ago has grown accustomed to.

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HBO broadcasters Larry Merchant and Jim Lampley have been consistent and unbridled critics of Ruiz's style, which is, to be kind, less than pleasing to watch. Yet those skills have twice taken a kid who grew up in a rough part of Boston to the heavyweight champions, were enough to go 1-1-1 against Evander Holyfield when he still could fight and twice resulted in his losing hotly disputed decisions to then WBA champion Nikolai Valuev in Germany.

Those two fights were the reason Ruiz is now facing Haye. Although he was Valuev's mandatory challenger for a third time Ruiz felt it wise to defer to Haye, allowing the muscular Brit to face Valuev with a guarantee he would get the winner.

Ruiz, like De La Hoya, HBO executives and most everyone in boxing assumed Haye would dethrone Valuev and he did but he failed to dominate him, struggling with the 7-foot Russian and looking oddly passive much of the night.

In the end none of that mattered to Ruiz. All that mattered was he would get a second chance to become a three-time champion regardless of what the boxing world thought or would have preferred.

"This is my second chance," Ruiz said. "Things are perfect at this point. I feel at ease for the first time in a long time.

"All the time (Don) King was promoting me it wasn't a happy marriage. It was Don first and me second. I signed with him when I was No. 3 in the world because I felt I'd never get a shot at Lennox (Lewis) and King had Holyfield.

"He did give me an opportunity to fight Holyfield (three straight times as things turned out) but Don always made more than me. I'm glad it's over between us. The last few times I fought for him he worked against me. It's been a battle with King for quite a while now."

Now the most popular Latino fighter of his time, De La Hoya, is promoting the only Latino to ever hold the heavyweight title, a marriage which seems perfectly made. Time will tell about that of course because Ruiz knows all too well that his new promoter's view of him will depend on how he's viewed after squaring off with Haye.

Win a portion of the world title again and doors will open. Lose again (he's 5-5-1 with a no contest) and he'll need dynamite to get back into the ring with a top-rated heavyweight.

Such has been Ruiz's fate for much of his career. He has been dismissed more times than Charlie Sheen's wives yet he has overcome each loss, long odds, a displeasing style and falling outs with both King and his long-time manager, Norman Stone, to find himself one fight from the heavyweight championship for a remarkable third time.

Looking back, the road has been long and littered with land mines not all of his own making and yet he remains a survivor and, with some luck, maybe more than that.

"This gets a little harder the older you get," Ruiz said of making the shift from civilian to warrior.

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“The older you get the lazier you get. But I know if I don’t take advantage of this I’m beating myself. I’m going to be covering every corner.

“I’m very surprised to be in this situation where things are finally positioned right for my career. Too many of the fights I had came out negative even when I won because so many people were criticizing me.

“I fought most of the fighters out there. There’s not one person I avoided so I’m glad I’m still healthy enough to have this title shot.

“Many times I felt like quitting but I didn’t. Not many people can say they were two-time heavyweight champion. Only one can say they were the first Latino to win the heavyweight championship. They can’t take those things from me. I’m happy with my career but I feel I have a few more fights like this one in me.”

Nearly 25 years ago, when Ruiz first walked into the Somerville Boxing Club in a hardscrabble part of town just across the bridge from Boston, he was there to live someone else’s dream. As things turned out however it became a dream larger than either he or his stepfather could have imagined.

That dream is close to ending now but come April 3, the wide-eyed kid who walked into the gym that day will be with Ruiz, a part of him he now remembers most when he goes to gyms like the one in South Boston and sees kids like he was hitting bags, skipping rope and dreaming of something so few ever reach.

“I started off like these kids,” Ruiz said. “I look at them and think how long a road it’s been. I’d never recommend boxing to anybody who doesn’t love it but if you do go for it.

“It’s funny what happened to me. If my mother didn’t split up with my father and come to Boston from Puerto Rico I’d probably be playing baseball. My Dad’s thing was baseball. My step-Dad’s thing was boxing. That’s how I got here.”

That way and with a lot of work, hard work, some heartbreak and a night with former heavyweight contender David Tua that lasted only 19 seconds.

That’s how long it took Tua to knock him cold nearly 14 years ago. When he left Atlantic City sitting silently through the six hour drive back to Boston with Stone late that night, it seemed impossible to believe one day he would be two-time champion and Tua would have faded into obscurity after losing badly in several title chances.

That is the fascination of boxing. You never know whose hand will be raised or who will emerge from the kind of spirit-crushing defeat Ruiz endured that night to make much more of themselves than anyone would have predicted.

“You always have to dream big to accomplish anything,” said Ruiz. “That fight with Tua was a night to remember. I keep it in the back of my mind always. It was an eye opener for me.

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“I’ve never forgotten it because I learned from that night. It’s tough to get off the floor and become champion but don’t count out determination. Some have it and some don’t.

“As a light heavyweight (when he turned professional) I never knew I’d be heavyweight champion but I kept that dream alive. That was the drive for me to keep fighting no matter what.

“I always wanted to fight the Klitschkos because I believed I had the style to beat them. I think the critics at HBO were afraid of the same thing so they never let the match happen.

“I understood. I didn’t bring money to the table so for HBO to take a chance of them losing made no sense to them. That’s when the love of boxing changed on me.

“I realized boxing was not what I first thought it would be. I thought it was a sport, a competition between you and a guy who thought he was better than you and you fight to settle it. I never thought a guy was better because he talked better than you. I thought it was only if he fought better than you but there’s more to it than that.

“I understand now I wasn’t bringing a dime to the table but I was dangerous to them. Still am. I was angry about that for a long time because I thought for a long time it was just a sport like it was when I was a kid. Eventually you learn to treat it as a business.

“These days nobody is fighting nobody in the heavyweight division but I’ve always fought anybody. After I win the title back from Haye I still want the Klitschkos. They’re defensive fighters who hate to throw punches or take chances. I always felt I could beat those guys. After the Haye fight I hope I get the chance because they’re perfect for me.”