

Watch Out Donaire, Or You Could Be Penelosa

Written by Ron Borges

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Saturday night Nonito Donaire will have in front of him visual evidence of what he spoke about earlier this week.

During a telephone conference call to hype Saturday night's Top Rank PPV show on which he's headlining against an opponent who only took the job three days ago, Donaire spoke of the big fights he hopes will follow against Vic Darchinyan, Jorge Arce, Fernando Montiel and possibly even Israel Vazquez. He spoke, too, of being 26 and knowing he needed to get those fights in soon because boxing doesn't last forever.

"It's now or never," Donaire said. "I got to fight those guys because my body is feeling the pain of cutting down in weight."

The bulk of his discussion was not about the passage of time but rather about bulk itself, citing his belief that he does not feel he can make 115 pounds much longer. He's probably right about that but the fact is, it is time that is his greatest opponent because each year that slips by he is one step closer to being Gerry Penalosa, the once formidable Filipino fighter who will be on Donaire's undercard.

It doesn't seem that long ago that Penalosa was the young man on the rise, a Filipino phenomenon for whom great things were predicted. Penalosa won two world titles but never quite became what his strongest advocates, myself included, thought he might be.

There are reasons for that and talent was not really one of them. Talent was not the problem with Penalosa, at least not until the last few years. Bad luck, bad timing, off nights and the usual business of boxing issues were more the things that conspired against him.

Yet at 37 he presses on against ever widening odds. Penalosa has lost his last six world title fights, including a one-sided beating from WBO super bantamweight champion Juan Manuel Lopez last year that seemed to have been his swan song. Despite the evidence in front of him, he refuses to stop, fighting on in hopes he can recapture the glory one last time before he's forced to leave behind the bright lights for good.

It doesn't seem likely Penalosa (54-7-2, 36 KO) will find the formula to defeat Eric Morel (41-2, 21 KO) and even if he does, what will it matter? His time is clearly past and there is a warning there for young Donaire.

Do not delay your dreams. Do not believe there is always another day and another time to fight. Look at Penalosa and see what the future can be if your business is not fully taken care of in its time.

While Donaire is at the height of his powers at the moment, time passes quickly in boxing. Many things can derail a young champion. Physical problems, emotional problems, business

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problems. Much can happen outside the ring that limits you inside the ring and one day you look up and you are a 37-year-old guy who won't quit even though it's time.

Because of that one hopes Donaire and his astute manager, Cameron Dunkin, will lose little time making a rematch with Darchinyan after the required exercise is done with Manuel Vargas, who climbed into this event Wednesday only after Gerson Guerrero failed an eye test.

Even had Guerrero's vision been intact it was unlikely his senses would be for long against Donaire (22-1, 14 KO) and the feeling is even stronger that will be the case for Vargas. Donaire seemed to acknowledge that during his teleconference, spending far more time discussing what's next even though he understood there is an inherent danger in that. Try though he might, it is difficult to ignore a bright future ahead when, frankly, there doesn't really appear to be much of an obstacle in front of you.

"That's the hardest part for a fighter, not looking ahead," Donaire admitted. "It's a lot of pressure on your shoulders.

"This fight is a gate for my future fights. I have to fight this fight first before I get those bigger names. This is where I've seen fighters stumble and not get their biggest fight. I try to stay focused as much as I can. When I train, though, I get the vision of fighting those other guys and it's hard to focus on this guy.

"I'm not purposely looking ahead, but part of my mind and body is so excited about those other fights that it's hard not to. So this fight is sort of like the motivation. I trained so hard because I don't want to stumble."

We have heard that line many times before only to learn the fighter was not able to avoid the pitfalls of looking down the road when he should have been running the roads, yet Donaire knows he can make big money by the standards of boxing's little men against Darchinyan in a unification fight if he safely navigates Saturday's fight because they have a one-punch history.

That's how long it took Donaire to knock out the loud-mouthed Darchinyan when last they met three years ago. If he could get that done again, Donaire would have unified some of the too many titles that exist at 115 pounds and then would hope to fight his stablemate Jorge Arce (who is also promoted by Bob Arum) before moving up to 118 for perhaps one fight with champion Fernando Montiel (who is also promoted by Arum).

By then he'd be on his way to 122 pounds and would probably be on his way toward 30 as well because these things seldom run either smoothly or chronologically. Something seems to always interfere and, if you are not careful, you look up and you are Gerry Penalosa, a guy who lived a dream once but now is just a dreamer in a business built on nightmares.