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They have broken each other's bodies three times but never each other's spirit. That is why word that a fourth Israel Vazquez-Rafael Marquez fight has been made for May 22 at the Staples Center in L.A. is good news for boxing and for SHOWTIME subscribers. It may be less so for the two fighters.

Under the leadership of Ken Hershman, SHOWTIME has become a significant low-budget challenger to HBO's dominance of big-time boxing. Although SHOWTIME lacks the budget to compete against HBO's checkbook when the cable giant decides it really wants a particular fight or fighter, Hershman has spent his money wisely lately and the result has been an ongoing series of top draw events like its Super 6 super middleweight tournament. Vazquz-Marquez IV only adds to that list.

Vazquez leads the series two wins to one but frankly he looked like the fighter who has come out the worse for wear judging by the length of their layoffs following the third fight on March 1, 2008 and the repercussions from it that were exhibited when each came back to boxing after more than a year layoff.

After winning what was supposed to be the rubber match by a one-point, split decision, Vazquez laid off 19 months and underwent three surgeries to repair a retina problem he could lay at the fists of Marquez. When he finally did return last Oct. 10 against the less-than-formidable Angel Priolo, Vazquez found a way to win, as he so often has, but it was far more of an uncomfortable struggle than it should have been.

Perhaps this was just a matter of knocking off a goodly amount of rust and getting comfortable again in the hot kitchen of a boxing ring, but somehow it looked like more than that. It looked like the Israel Vazquez (44-4, 33 KO) we had all grown to admire had been beaten down to the point where what remains will never be the same.

If that is the case, it will likely be become apparent on May 22 because Marquez's return on May 23, 2009 against Jose Francisco Mendoza went far more successfully. Although Mendoza will never be mistaken for a clone of someone like Vazquez, Marquez got rid of him in three rounds after a 14-month layoff, as he should have considering the gap in talent between the two of them. Although Marquez was stopped by Vazquez in their rematch and dropped in the final round of their third fight to give Vazquez his margin of victory, it always seemed he was less damaged than the man to whom he is now forever linked.

That is not to suggest Marquez (38-5, 34 KO) hasn't suffered significant and irreparable damage himself however. At 35, Marquez may have been close to the end of the line even under the best of circumstances but the way he lost the WBC super bantamweight title to Vazquez in their second and third fights left him far from in the best of circumstances.

That is one thing that will make this fight interesting to project because no one – including the

fighters themselves – can be sure how much the other has left to give. Heart will never be the question but the body can take only so much. Same is true of battered eyes and broken noses. They often give out before the will of a great fighter does, conspiring against his best efforts without his full knowledge until it is too late.

Yet who in boxing will not be anticipating that night when the two of them square off once again in the tradition of boxing in its greatest days of the 1940s and 1950s, when such ongoing series of fights were far from unusual. Too often it's now one and done. Back then it was fight until we're both done.

That is part of the legacy these two men will leave behind when the boxing is over, a fact Marquez discussed when the fight was announced by Golden Boy Promotions and Gary Shaw, co-promoters of the event.

"Israel Vazquez and I are destined to be intertwined because of the legendary battles we have waged against each other,'' Marquez said in a prepared statement. "I intend to close the book on our rivalry by dictating the final chapter. I have never wanted to fight so much in my life. I'm fighting for my legacy.''

Actually, the two-time world champion's legacy is already well established. Whatever happens on May 22 can enhance it perhaps but it cannot diminish it even if both prove to be severely damaged goods. The same is true for Vazquez, who many thought would be forced to retire after the series of surgeries required to repair his torn retina.

Ever the realist, when Vazquez came back last October, even he admitted he couldn't be sure how he would feel in the ring. After it was over the 32-year-old Vazquez conceded he was not his old self but predicted things would get better. He has to hope so because even his best nights against Marquez have been hellish.

Not only was his eye severely injured as a result of what he endured but he suffered a badly shattered nose in the first fight as well, an injury that so affected his breathing he had to quit on his stool after the seventh round. Vazquez fought bravely that night and came back to win the next two but now he's a mystery as May 22 approaches. Regardless of those problems, one thing is not a mystery, and Vazquez knows it.

"Without a doubt this is going to be a war like the previous fights were,'' he said.

He's right about that despite the fact neither man is the same fighter he was when this all began, nor could be expected to be. Each has left far too much of themselves behind in those rings, pieces that cannot be glued back into place nor fully repaired.

Yet their hearts remain strong and so it is unlikely what surely seems to be their final meeting will go much differently than the previous three brutally bloody affairs. Attention must be paid and honor given to two men willing to give so much to entertain a blood thirsty public.

By May 22, it may prove that heart is all they have left. If so, it will still be a hell of a night.