

What IF: Arguello vs. Sanchez

Written by Frank Lotierzo

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The phrase "What if" probably applies to the late Salvador Sanchez more than any other fighter in boxing history. Forget, "What if he fought Alexis Arguello?" How about, "What if he hadn't died in a tragic car accident at age 23?" Salvador Sanchez died on August 12, 1982 when he was returning to his training camp somewhere between the hours of 4 & 5 am when his Porsche rammed the back of a poultry transit truck killing him instantly. It's been more than rumored that Sanchez was racing back to camp from one of his infamous flings.

At the time of his death, Sanchez was considered one of the top pound-for-pound fighters in the world. A good case could have been made that he was the best. He was the reigning WBC featherweight champion who had just stopped Azumah Nelson in his last fight on July 21, 1982 at Madison Square Garden, making his ninth successful title defense.

Salvador Sanchez turned pro at the age of 16 and won 17 of his first 18 fights by knockout. In his first major fight, Sanchez was dropped in the first round by Mexican featherweight champ Antonio Becerra. Becerra went on to win the fight scoring a 12 round unanimous decision. This would prove to be the only time Sanchez was ever knocked down or lost. Sanchez would go on to win 15 of his next 16 fights with the only blemish being a draw against Juan Escobar. Among Sanchez's victims were Carlos Mimila and Felix Trinidad Sr.

On February 2, 1980, Sanchez fought reigning featherweight champ Danny "Little Red" Lopez. Lopez was a popular champion who fought many exciting fights on network TV in the late 1970's. "Little Red" was coming off impressive wins over Dave Kotey (twice), Juan Malvares and Mike Ayala. Sanchez took the title from Lopez giving him a one-sided battering and stopping him in the 13th round. However, many ringside observers at the time felt that Sanchez's one-sided win was a fluke due to the relative ease in which he accomplished it.

After making one title defense, Sanchez and Lopez would fight a rematch on June 21, 1980. Sanchez proved the first fight was no fluke and took Lopez apart again stopping him in the 14th round this time. From September 13, 1980 through July 21, 1982 Sanchez made seven consecutive title defenses. Some of the fighters he defeated were the highly touted Patrick Ford, Juan LaPorte, Wilfredo Gomez and Azumah Nelson.

Sanchez is probably best remembered for his 1981 destruction of WBC junior featherweight champ Wilfredo Gomez. Gomez was undefeated in 33 fights winning 32 by knockout before fighting Sanchez. Going into the fight Gomez was just about a 2-1 favorite. In a fight that titled "Battle of the Little Giants" by Don King, Sanchez destroyed Gomez in eight rounds sending him back down to the junior featherweight division. In the fight, Sanchez put Gomez down in the first round and broke his cheekbone in the fight.

Tragically, Sanchez's life came to an end during the early morning hours in his speeding Porsche. The list of beaten opponents by Sanchez reads like a who's who list of the great featherweights of his era. Ruben Castillo, Wilfredo Gomez and future champs Juan LaPorte and

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Azumah Nelson.

Although Sanchez was not known to be a knockout puncher, he could hit. However, he was an excellent counter-puncher and dismantled his opponents with swift accurate counter punches. At the time of his death, there were talks of Sanchez facing Gomez in a rematch and then possibly moving up to lightweight and challenging champion Alexis Arguello. Sadly, we can only imagine how it would have turned out. Sanchez retired with a record of 44-1-1 (32) and was inducted to the International Boxing Hall of Fame in 1991.

Like Sanchez, Alexis Arguello also turned pro at age 16. He lost his pro debut when Cachorro Amaya stopped him in the first round. Arguello would go on to win world titles in three separate weight divisions and never lost any of his titles in the ring. After losing his debut, Arguello ran off nearly 40 straight wins when he challenged WBA featherweight champ Ernest Marcel. Arguello would lose a unanimous decision to the more experienced Marcel in his home country Panama. Soon after beating Arguello, Marcel retired and the hard punching Mexican, Ruben Olivares, would win Marcel's vacated title.

On November 23, 1974 in his first fight in the United States, Arguello won the WBA featherweight title with a 13th round knockout of Ruben Olivares. After making four defenses of the featherweight title, Arguello relinquished it. In his fifth fight at junior lightweight, he fought WBC junior lightweight and long-time reigning champ Alfredo Escalera. Arguello stopped Escalera in 13 brutal rounds to capture the title.

After making three defenses of the title, Arguello fought Escalera again, and again stopped him in the 13th round. Arguello in total would defend the junior lightweight title eight times, more than any other title he held. Like Sanchez, only at junior lightweight, the list of fighters Arguello defeated is a who's who list of outstanding fighters the likes of Ruben Castillo, and future titleholders Bobby Chacon, Bazooka Limon and Rolando Navarette.

In October of 1980, Arguello vacated the WBC junior lightweight title. Eight months later, he decisioned WBC lightweight champ Jim Watt to win his third title. In his first defense, he stopped top contender Ray "Boom Boom" Mancini in the 14th round. After Mancini, Arguello made three more successful defenses of the lightweight title before vacating it in hopes of adding a fourth title to his resume.

Arguello would attempt to win the junior welterweight title after fighting one time in his new division. On November 12, 1982, Arguello challenged the top 140-pound fighter in the world, WBA junior welterweight champ Aaron Pryor. On a beautiful night at the Orange Bowl in Miami, Pryor proved to be too much for Arguello. In a fight that ranks as one of histories best, Arguello couldn't overcome Pryor's speed and power in suffering the worst beating of his brilliant career, being stopped in the 14th round.

Ten months later Arguello fought Pryor again and the rematch proved to be a rerun with Pryor stopping Arguello in the 10th round. After failing a second time in capturing the junior welterweight title Arguello retired. Arguello would come out of retirement twice fighting four times and winning three comeback fights suffering a decision loss in his last fight. Arguello

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retired with a career record of 80-8 (64) and was inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame in 1992.

When comparing Arguello and Sanchez, it's difficult to make absolute accessions because of Sanchez's career being cut short while he was only 23. Two absolutes I'll make are that in this comparison I'm matching them as featherweights, although Arguello was most successful as a junior lightweight and made the most defenses of that title, and was champion as a junior lightweight longer than in any other division.

The other is that their fighting styles were completely different. Arguello was a boxer-puncher who liked to push the fight, and carried knockout power in both hands. Sanchez was a counter-puncher who was a tremendous boxer who had very fast hands. Both fighters also possessed a great chin.

Salvador Sanchez was a fighter who ate up punchers who brought the fight to him. He gave both Lopez and Gomez the two worse shellackings they ever took while they were at or close to their peak. Fighters who didn't jump on him and go right at him usually fared much better. Sanchez was also marvelously conditioned. I don't ever recall seeing him winded or tired.

Even in his fight with Gomez, a fight that was fought at close to a Hagler-Hearns pace, only for eight rounds, Sanchez maintained a blistering pace versus Gomez and never seemed the least bit tired. He also had a concrete chin. Both Lopez and Gomez could really punch and caught Sanchez flush on the chin and Sanchez never even changed his facial expression. However, he is probably best known for his wonderfully accurate counter-punching. Talk about a fighter making his opponents pay for making them miss, Sanchez was the master. Loading up and missing Sanchez led to getting ripped with three and four punch combinations that were accurate and seemed almost laser guided.

Alexis Arguello was the prototype boxer-puncher, and at 5'10", he was exceptionally tall for a fighter who weighed under 150 pounds. He was a fighter that exhibited tremendous basics. Like a little Joe Louis, he threw straight punches while always keeping his chin down and his hands up. Arguello was also economical with his punch output, you rarely saw him throwing wildly, or wasting punches. When he let his hands go, they usually found their target. One difference between Louis and Arguello was that Arguello's hook and uppercut had a more looping ark to them. Like Louis, Alexis also had dynamite in both hands.

Arguello mostly fought a somewhat pressure style. He didn't pressure his opponents like a Frazier or Duran; it was more a subtle type pressure like Louis. Another thing Arguello shared with Louis was that they were vulnerable versus fighters who had fast feet. That's not saying they couldn't fight fighters that had good movement. It is verifying that fighters who moved against them usually fared the best. The fighters who brought the fight to Arguello are the ones who he defeated in the most devastating fashion.

Like Sanchez, Arguello also had a great chin. Arguello was never really hurt until he fought Aaron Pryor at junior welterweight. He also had outstanding stamina and could fight at any pace. Just watch both fights with Pryor and you'll see the tremendous pace they both kept for

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14 and 10 rounds.

Who Would Have Won

Many times over the years when discussing a hypothetical Arguello-Sanchez fight, when asked to pick the winner, I couldn't. I usually responded saying the only way I can pick this fight, is if someone put a gun to my head. From a style standpoint, it's tough to give one fighter a decided edge over the other.

Arguello would've pressured Sanchez but not over aggressively. Sanchez would've been comfortable with Arguello coming to him. However, it's not the type of pressure that he usually dismantled. Sanchez had tremendous feet, and moved side-to-side and back very effectively. However, Sanchez wasn't a mover like a Hector Camacho who basically just ran. So, it's not as if Arguello wouldn't have been able to find him.

Sanchez's superior hand speed would've been effective versus Arguello, but not as it was against most fighters because Alexis didn't miss many punches once he let his hands go, thus he wouldn't be left as open to be countered. Although Sanchez would've nailed Arguello on the way in, Arguello had such a great chin I can't see Sanchez dropping him. On the other hand, Sanchez also had a great chin and was rarely caught by two big punches in a row.

This is a fight in which I can't envision either fighter stopping the other and can very easily see it going either way. I think at featherweight they are that evenly matched. I guess the outcome may hinge on the pace of the fight. If Arguello can turn the fight into a war or a street fight that would favor him. We know that if pushed, Sanchez would fight him back and try and stand his ground. Both Lopez and Gomez were able to get Sanchez to war with them in spots. However, Sanchez wasn't really bothered by their power. I'm not sure that would've been the case with Arguello.

On the other hand, if Arguello fights at his normal measured pace, it would benefit Sanchez. Without Arguello applying unrelenting pressure on him, Sanchez could pick his spots. With Sanchez picking his spots, his movement and hand speed may have carried him to a decision.

One thing that really makes this match up so difficult to handicap is that we may not have seen the best of Sanchez. He was only 23 when he was killed. I don't think it's a stretch to believe that it's possible we didn't see all that he had. When it comes to Arguello, we saw his best and know that he really couldn't be dealt with until he fought at 140 when he fought Pryor. So it's hard to imagine him being taken apart by another featherweight, all be it a great one in Sanchez.

I will say this; I don't think Sanchez could've gone up in weight as successfully as Arguello. He wasn't as big a man as Arguello. I think Sanchez may have hit the wall at lightweight like Arguello did at junior welterweight. And at that, I'm not sure Alexis hit the wall at 140, it may have been Pryor was the wall. I have no doubt that Arguello probably wins the title if he's fighting any other top junior welterweight in the world other than Pryor.

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When it comes to evaluating Arguello and Sanchez at featherweight, there can be no doubt that Sanchez beat better fighters than Arguello did. The best fighters Arguello defeated at 126 are Ruben Olivares, and Royal Kobayashi, compared to Sanchez who beat Danny Lopez, Juan LaPorte, Wilfredo Gomez and Azumah Nelson, all of whom Sanchez stopped except LaPorte. Based on that fact, I'll go with Sanchez by a razor thin decision. Realistically, this is a match up I really can't pick with any conviction.