

## Conflicted Over Canelo: Is Alvarez The Goods?

Written by Eric Raskin  
Tuesday, 01 March 2011 21:27

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*Matt Hatt probably is on the same level as Ndou, who Canelo handled in December. So we likely won't go far in figuring out what Golden Boy's new golden child is all about on Saturday. But beyond that..weigh in, TSS Universe. Will Canelo live up to lofty expectations? (Hogan)*

It's really not fair to try to guess whether a 20-year-old is going to be successful in life. How many sophomores or juniors in college even know what field they want to go into, much less whether they'll be any good in their chosen career? Most 20-year-olds are focused on where the best party is and who's buying the beer, not establishing their professional worth. So it's probably unfair to attempt to extrapolate how far Saul "Canelo" Alvarez is going as a boxer as he stands before us now, more than four months away from his 21st birthday.

But then again ... who cares if it's fair? It's FUN.

It's what we do in the sports world. It's why people were throwing the "next Jordan" tag at LeBron James when he was still in high school. It's why the Philadelphia Flyers traded six quality players, two first-round draft picks, and \$15-million for a teenaged Eric Lindros in 1992. Sports is largely about speculation, particularly in the case of unproven, young, high-ceiling athletes. So when someone like Alvarez comes along, we can't help but speculate.

Alvarez is already a ticketseller and already the closest thing boxing has had to a sex symbol since Oscar De La Hoya. On the basis of the crowds and buzz he generates, Alvarez is someone who demands to be dissected by the fans and the writers. And as he prepares for his first live fight on HBO this Saturday, against Matthew Hatton, now is the time to get way ahead of ourselves and ask the question: Will Alvarez make it?

There are good arguments on both sides, so let's break it down point/counterpoint style. (Traditionally, it takes two expert analysts to do a point/counterpoint. But you can also do it with one analyst who sees both sides of the issue and can't make up his mind which side is right.) So here goes with why Canelo will make it ... and why Canelo won't make it:

**CANELO WILL MAKE IT BECAUSE ...**

... the kid can punch. If you saw the left hook that shattered the rock-solid chin of Carlos

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Baldomir last September, you know what I'm talking about. And his recent blastouts of Brian Camechis and Carlos Herrera were fairly spectacular as well. With 26 knockouts in 36 fights, we're obviously not talking about the second coming of Tommy Hearns, but Alvarez has legitimate pop.

And remember, a lot of fighters don't develop their full "man strength" until they're a little bit older. Maybe Alvarez has his already, or maybe he's a good young puncher who's going to mature into a truly great puncher. If that happens—if he's going to get, say, 10 percent better in the power department over the next few years—then Baldomir's won't be the last thick beard to get shorn by Alvarez.

### CANELO WON'T MAKE IT BECAUSE ...

... there's a chance he can't take a punch. If you saw the left hook from Jose Miguel Cotto that made Alvarez's knees do the double-jointed dance, you know what I'm talking about. Cotto turned pro at 122 pounds and had his best success as a lightweight, yet here he was seemingly a punch or two from kayoing 150-pound Canelo in the first round.

Hey, it happens, especially when it's just a minute or so into a fight and a boxer hasn't really gotten warmed up yet. And Alvarez showed heart and decent recuperative powers the rest of the round. Because Alvarez came back and won the fight, you couldn't play the "exposed!" card afterward. But getting rocked in the first place by Cotto was at least a red flag, if not quite a Code Red, for the kid with the red hair.

### CANELO WILL MAKE IT BECAUSE ...

... he's only 20 and barely had an amateur career. As Larry Merchant said on HBO.com's preview video for the Hatton fight, "He is, for 20 years old, as good looking a young fighter as I've seen." That's some pretty stinkin' high praise.

Alvarez first started boxing at age 13, had a measly 20 bouts in the unpaid ranks, and turned pro at just 15. There are two things worth noting about this: First, he's obviously been learning on the job and has the potential to get considerably better than he is now. And second, he seems to be exceptionally mature for his age and experience level, which bodes very well indeed. Precocious talent is a fine place to start, but ask Tony Ayala Jr., Francisco Bojado, Ricardo Williams Jr., etc., how far talent takes you if you don't have a good head on your shoulders.

### CANELO WON'T MAKE IT BECAUSE ...

... he's slow as a turtle in molasses on a glacier, and you can't teach hand speed. Okay, maybe that cliché combination is an exaggeration (not to mention you'll rarely find molasses on a glacier), but Alvarez' hand speed is average at best.

Look at the top of the pound-for-pound list; Manny Pacquiao, Floyd Mayweather, Sergio Martinez, and Nonito Donaire all get an "A" or "A+" in hand speed. There are, of course, ways to

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compensate for modest speed with technique and timing. But you have to question whether a guy like Alvarez can truly reach the elite level if, at that level, his opponents are all beating him to the punch.

### CANELO WILL MAKE IT BECAUSE ...

... he's an action fighter, which means one or two or three losses won't prevent him from getting opportunities. Once a stinker like Billy Dib suffers one defeat, that's it; we're done with him. But Alvarez makes for entertaining fights (except maybe last time out against Lovemore Ndou, a ho-hum boxing exhibition), and as Arturo Gatti reminded us, there's more than one path to superstardom in this sport.

I'm not saying Alvarez reminds anyone of Gatti in the drama department, but perhaps he will when he starts facing true tests. Michael Katsidis loses every time he steps up and HBO welcomes him back regardless. If Alvarez wins some and loses some when he steps up, that might be good enough to make him one of the sport's biggest stars over the next decade.

### CANELO WON'T MAKE IT BECAUSE ...

... action fighters with defensive deficiencies tend to have short careers. Gatti really bucked the odds by fighting into his mid-30s. More often, a guy who doesn't move his head enough, gets hit a lot, and stands and trades when he doesn't have to burns out in his 20s, a la Fernando Vargas or Juan Diaz or, if you want to go back a century or so, Terry McGovern.

Alvarez's defense seems to be slowly improving and we haven't yet seen his skin rip open, but he still gets hit more than is advisable. It's not easy to exhibit good defense AND be entertaining, but it's important that Alvarez find a reasonable approximation of that balance.

### CANELO WILL MAKE IT BECAUSE ...

... Golden Boy Promotions seems intent on guiding him carefully and will give him as much time as he needs to develop. For his age, Alvarez is being advanced somewhat quickly (especially when you compare his opposition with that of fellow Mexican mega-draw Julio Cesar Chavez Jr.). But when you take a close look, you see some very deliberate matchmaking going on here.

Herrera and Camechis had decent records (a combined 40-3) but modest punching power (16 combined knockouts). Cotto, as discussed earlier, was not really in the same weight class as Alvarez. Luciano Cuello's record looked nice, but he wasn't a puncher either and he hadn't really beaten anybody. Baldomir was 39 and mostly used up. Ndou was also 39, a bit faded, and a bit undersized.

This is the way you're supposed to do it: Feed a prospect opponents who aren't bums, but who aren't threats to upset him. Hatton is at best a sideways step from Ndou (I expect Alvarez to have an easier time with the Brit this Saturday night), and that's good enough to get Alvarez on HBO because his promotional company has juice and because Alvarez has the boxing world buzzing. He can go on a while longer this way and not have to risk defeat against a

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championship-caliber foe until he's ready.

### CANELO WON'T MAKE IT BECAUSE ...

... if he really wants to be great and make obscene money, he'll have to face a top-of-the-line opponent eventually. Everybody but Jose Sulaiman and a few people with their noses uncomfortably entrenched in Jose's rear knows that the Hatton fight won't make Alvarez a champion. Deep down, surely Alvarez knows it. And there are plenty of major fights lurking for him at 147 or 154 pounds on the road to REAL champion status. This is the weight range where Pacquiao, Floyd Mayweather, Miguel Cotto, Andre Berto, Kermit Cintron, and Alfredo Angulo reside. Merchant caused a collective spit-take from the boxing world mentioning Alvarez's name in conjunction with Pac-Man's last year, but eventually, a fight like that might happen.

If he's as gifted as Merchant thinks he is, maybe Canelo can beat some of these top-flight fighters. If he's not? Well, any second-rate fighter can win a belt nowadays, but Alvarez is in a weight range where a second-rate fighter doesn't have a chance at becoming the true champion.

So which will it be? Will Canelo make it or not? I'm very much undecided, but gun to my head, I have to lean toward "not." I see a fighter whose popularity will probably outrun his ability. But, again, that's a conclusion reached with no conviction whatsoever.

All I can say confidently is that whatever your opinion of Alvarez at this moment, the Matthew Hatton fight isn't going to change it.

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#### **FighterforJC says:**

I think this title fight for Canelo could turn around and bite him in the buttocks. Once Canelo becomes a world champ, he'll have no excuse to fight class C fighters and at 20, it's not such a bad thing for him to be fighting the type of opposition we've seen him against. But as soon as he's world champ he'd have to deal with the likes of Angulo, Kermit Cintron maybe James Kirkland. Goldenboy can't baby him if he's the champ.

#### **Radam G says:**

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Canelo is another superhype. Da sucka can barely fyght. Any management with an iota of a brain will not move him anywhere near a REAL contender with a pulse. There is no need to rush Saul. He may be a red head, but he is not red hot. There are too many top dawgs who would deep fry him like a turkey in large pot. He'd be a field day for the BIG BOYS to punk. Hehehehehehe! They'd easily take his WBC gifted title belt geedunk. Sometimes these alphabet sanctioning organizations get carry away. They are giving out title belts like diploma mills give out degrees. TA' MAKE DAT PAY. Holla!