

Making The Most Of A “Terrible” Situation...RASKIN

Written by Eric Raskin

Wednesday, 14 September 2011 21:57



There are some in the boxing media who find it worth noting that Erik Morales will be attempting to win a title in his fourth division this Saturday night. As someone who cares as much about alphabet belts as I do whatever next week's Brett Favre comeback rumors will be, I'm much more interested in a different "fourth" that Morales is pursuing on the Floyd Mayweather-Victor Ortiz undercard: the fourth man to fill his opponent slot for this show.

This has been one of the more unusual matchmaking merry-go-rounds we've ever seen because the majority of the opponent-replacement news has actually been positive. Initially, Morales was supposed to face unknown Brit Anthony Crolla. Then Jorge Barrios became available when word spread that the legally troubled "Hyena" was going to be allowed to leave Argentina, so he replaced Crolla. To most observers, Morales-Barrios was an upgrade over Morales-Crolla. When it turned out Barrios and his oversized sunglasses weren't going to be allowed out of his homeland after all, Team Morales was back on the hunt for an opponent, and

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they came up with Lucas Matthyse, unquestionably a sterner test than either Crolla or Barrios. In fact, it went from a showcase fight for Morales to one in which he was perceived as the underdog.

But then just last week, Matthyse dropped out with a viral infection, and on nine days' notice, 21-year-old Mexican prospect Pablo Cesar Cano got the call. This time, the change represented a backward step for fight fans. But given the short notice and the difficulty in finding a credible opponent who would be in fighting shape, this was a hell of a save. Cano is undefeated, from Mexico City, and trained by Rudy Perez, the longtime trainer of Marco Antonio Barrera. Morales-Cano is no Morales-Matthyse. But we've seen some pointless pay-per-view undercard fights in recent years that were put together on a couple of months' notice, so with that in mind, we should be happy that Morales-Cano is no Danny Jacobs-Victor Lares or Edner Cherry-Wes Ferguson.

Some will say that we're right back where we were at the start with Morales-Crolla—but in truth, Morales-Crolla wasn't such a bad matchup. I had studied some of Crolla's fights back when the matchup was first announced, and he's better than he looks on paper. Yes, with his babyface and hair parted on the side, Crolla could sooner pass for C. Thomas Howell's understudy in *The Outsiders* than a professional fighter. And yes, his ho-hum 21-2 (9) resume was built against guys with records that included 18-75-7, 7-102-2, and 4-43. (Seriously. Those aren't made up numbers.) But the opposition had gotten better over the last two years. And Crolla has vastly improved punching power for a guy who once went the distance nine fights in a row. He's busy, uses the jab, and bangs the body consistently. He also switches, fluidly, to the southpaw stance on occasion. Crolla would have been an underdog against Morales, to be sure. But it wasn't an all-out mismatch. Not against this aging version of “El Terrible.”

Cano seems of a threat level similar to Crolla. There's not a lot to judge with our own eyes; YouTube offers no full Cano fights, and clips from just two. In one (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cbwLdG92IRY>), you learn more about the round-card girl's posterior than you do Cano's fighting ability. In the other (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TelExEREByw>), you get the sense that Cano is capable of providing fun action, but you still don't know if he's any good.

“This is the opportunity of a lifetime and I couldn't refuse it,” Cano said in the formal press release announcing the fight. “I have grown up watching Erik Morales. I know both his strengths and weaknesses. While it's an honor to fight him, I have the style to beat him.”

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In building a record of 22-0-1 (17), Cano has proven even less than Crolla. The only name on Cano's resume that you might recognize is Oscar Leon, who was 36 years old and had lost eight of his last nine when Cano beat him via split decision last June. Cano is an undefeated Mexican prospect, but the next Julio Cesar Chavez he is not. He might not even be good enough to pass for one of Chavez's kids. We just don't know. Maybe Cano has “the style to beat” Morales, as he says. Or maybe he's going to get liquefied by the old man in a round or two.

Whether it's quick and easy or long and taxing, a win over Cano won't do for Morales' career what a win over Matthisse would have. Beating Cano doesn't PROVE anything, except that Morales isn't a shot fighter, which we already (think we) know. Just like if he'd fought Crolla or Barrios, Morales is expected to win, and if he does, he remains what he is right now: a well-known name whom everybody at 140 pounds will want to fight.

So who might be next? Amir Khan's name has been floating out there quite a bit, but that seems like the worst possible matchup for Morales. El Terrible surprised most of us against Marcos Maidana in April, in large part because Maidana's style allowed him to surprise us. Khan's style—the one that befuddled Morales' arch rival Marco Antonio Barrera not too long ago—would almost certainly make the 34-year-old Morales look his age.

A rematch with Maidana is a lot more winnable and is certainly a realistic possibility, considering Robert Guerrero (Maidana's intended August opponent) just had shoulder surgery two weeks ago and won't be able to train until approximately the end of December.

We'd also all love to see the Matthisse fight revived. There was a lot of “this is going to steal the show from Mayweather and Ortiz” buzz surrounding the matchup, and it would make a fine HBO co-feature to whatever less-action-packed fight Khan signs for December.

And then there's Barrera. As Bill Dettloff and I discussed at length on a recent podcast, Morales' unexpected career revival is giving him an outside shot at possibly moving past Barrera on the all-time-greats list without even fighting his mortal enemy. But there's no substitute for a head-to-head win, and if Morales's primary goal in life is to be remembered as superior to Barrera, knotting their legendary series at 2-2 would be an enormous step in that direction. It's a good payday for each and, unless one of them suddenly develops Israel Vazquez's scar tissue,

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it's a wonderful fight for the fans.

If Morales loses to Cano, Barrera might be his only option for a meaningful fight. If he defeats Cano, he'll pretty much have his pick of the junior welter field. And if he has his pick of anyone ... well, I still want him to take on Barrera next.

But I'm getting way ahead of myself. We're still a few days away from Morales-Cano, after all. Who's to say we won't have two or three more opponent changes before Saturday night?

I don't know about you, but I'm kinda hoping Barrera's already in half-decent fighting shape and somewhere near his phone, just in case.

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