

CANELO-TROUT BRINGS FLASHBACKS TO 1993

Written by Bernard Fernandez
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Spanish philosopher/poet George Santayana once observed that "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." He meant it as a warning to future generations, that no mistake from another time should be expected to be forever corrected.

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But the past is repeated, more often than we might think, because there are only so many sets of circumstances that it probably is inevitable that what goes around, probably will come around again with a new set of characters. And so it is with Saturday night's super welterweight unification showdown of WBC champion Saul "Canelo" Alvarez (41-0-1, 30 KOs) and WBA titlist Austin Trout (26-0, 14 KOs), in San Antonio's Alamodome.

Does that matchup remind a lot of you of what took place, in the same city and stadium, the night of Sept. 10, 1993? Nearly 20 years have passed, and here boxing fans are, with the same drama – albeit with a possibly different outcome – being played out by fighters whose characteristics are strikingly similar to those of their predecessors. It's like a hit movie being remade with other actors, in this instance the role of Julio Cesar Chavez filled by Alvarez and the role of Pernell Whitaker assigned to Trout. But until the final punch is thrown, the final scene remains a mystery. The past is not necessarily prologue, at least not yet. We are left in doubt until the closing credits roll.

What happened on Sept. 10, 1993, forever shall remain one of the fight game's more unsatisfying controversies. There was no winner, no loser in the passion play that pitted a Mexican national hero (Chavez) against a slick African-American southpaw (Whitaker). The majority draw – judge Jack Woodruff, from Dallas, had Whitaker winning, 115-113, while cohorts Mickey Vann, of England, and Franz Marti, of Switzerland, each saw it as a 115-115 standoff – left some people enraged, many others relieved, and almost everyone perplexed.

Bottom line: Whitaker, whose WBC welterweight championship was on the line, retained his belt, although, because of the boxing skills and ring generalship "Sweet Pea" had demonstrated over 12 nearly flawless rounds, he and his backers felt he clearly deserved the victory and the distinction of becoming the first man to defeat the man known as "JC Superstar." Chavez fans – and they comprised the vast majority of the 63,000-plus who jammed the Alamodome – seemed relieved to have come away with the proverbial half-a-loaf, although some suggested that their man's unstinting attempts at forcing the action should have been credited more than Whitaker's duck-and-dodge tactics.

There was no rematch, and the suspicion has lingered to this day that the Mexico City-based WBC and its president, Jose Sulaiman, did not mandate one for fear that the second time around would produce even more of the same frustration that had marked Chavez's attempts to track down and, you know, actually hit Whitaker.

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Ferdie Pacheco, a color analyst for the Showtime pay-per-view telecast, had perhaps the most prescient take on what eventually happened.

"With a tremendously pro-Chavez crowd on hand, Whitaker is going to have to win decisively – very decisively – to get a decision if it goes the distance," Pacheco had predicted. "Don't tell me the judges won't be affected by 70,000 screaming Hispanics. They're only human. (Muhammad) Ali won fights he should have lost because, well, he was Ali.

"If Whitaker wins, it'll probably be one of the stinkiest fights of all time because that means he'll have been able to stay away from Chavez for 12 rounds. It takes incredible discipline to do that, and, let's face it, nobody has done it yet."

In some ways, perhaps Whitaker-Chavez more closely mirrors what took place just this past weekend, when a defensively brilliant Cuban southpaw, Guillermo Rigondeaux, played keepaway, stepping in for the occasional stinging counterpunch, to win an action-starved unanimous decision over Nonito Donaire in their 122-pound unification bout in New York City's Radio City Music Hall. There's that George Santayana thing again.

But Alvarez-Trout ... even Stevie Wonder can see how the storylines are lifted almost verbatim from Whitaker-Chavez. Put it all together and you can almost hear the theme from *The Twilight Zone* in the background.

A crowd of 40,000 is expected, and maybe even more will be in the stadium if there's a strong walk-up. An impressive turnout, no doubt, if not quite as large as the standing-room-only turnout for Whitaker-Chavez. Showtime Championship Boxing again will televise. You have Alvarez, the undefeated Mexican icon, replicating Chavez and Whitaker, whose fancy moves are a reasonable facsimile of Whitaker's, taking over for a fighter he readily admits is one of his pugilistic role models.

"It's a very similar fight," Alvarez said when asked about the eerie parallels between then and now. "I've watched (Whitaker-Chavez) on video several times. Austin Trout, like Pernell Whitaker, is a southpaw. He's slick, a very difficult fighter. But that's what we're training hard for.

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"Come the night of the fight, we're going to make it where it's not so difficult."

Trout says virtually the same things. "I do see a very similar comparison," he said about links to Whitaker-Chavez. "First of all, 'Sweet Pea' is one of my favorite fighters. But the difference between me and him is I can punch a bit.

"There are things that I saw (Whitaker) did in that fight that would have made it a lot less close, things he could have done to pull away from Chavez. The best way to not let history repeat itself is to know history. I know what happened in that fight. Just remember that Chavez is not Canelo and I'm not 'Sweet Pea.'"

In some ways, the scene-setting in advance of Whitaker-Chavez was more intriguing than the fight itself. Chavez's promoter, Don King, and Whitaker's promoter, Dan Duva, were hardly tight, and each man did his part to keep the pot boiling until the opening bell rang. King's preferred method was typical heh-heh-heh humor, while Duva, who since has passed away, saw possible conspiracies at every turn.

"The slogan for this fight will be 'Remember the Alamo,'" His Hairness had harrumphed during a prefight press conference, referencing the legendary three-day siege in 1836 at San Antonio's most famous landmark. "And this time, the Mexicans will win."

King was then reminded that the numerically superior Mexicans actually won at the Alamo.

"Well, this time they'll win again," King said while citing such historic Alamo defenders as Davy Crockett and Sam Bowie.

Sam Bowie? The 7-foot Portland Trail Blazers center with the chronically sore feet?

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"Aw, well, you know who I mean," King said, finally correcting himself. "I meant to say Jim Bowie, the guy with the big knife."

Duva, who once dressed his toddler son in a Don King fright wig for Halloween, didn't think jokes or malapropisms by his opposite number should mask what he feared would be a bias, intentional or not, against his fighter by those with the power to decide the outcome.

"Walking forward and getting hit in the face is not boxing," Duva, as serious as could be, said beforehand. "This is not a Toughman contest or a barroom brawl. It's who controls the ring. That's boxing. Pernell Whitaker is a master boxer and he's going to box Chavez's ears off."

But it wasn't only the promoters who got in on the act. At the press conference to officially announce the bout, Chavez, who was 87-0 with 75 knockouts, opined that Whitaker (32-1, 15 KOs at the time) lacked the "essentials" to defeat him. He then made a motion with his right hand that would not be unfamiliar to anyone who ever saw a Michael Jackson or Andrew Dice Clay crotch-grab. Gladys Rosa, serving as the interpreter for the Spanish-speaking Chavez, tried to explain his meaning to the English-speaking portion of the audience, only to be met with a howl of laughter from all present. It was a gesture that required no interpretation.

Not surprisingly, Chavez went off as a 2-1 favorite. And, given what had happened in one of the earlier bouts on the card, the apprehension voiced by Duva and Pacheco did seem to have at least some basis in fact. WBC super featherweight champion Azuman Nelson, of Ghana, retained his title on a split draw against popular San Antonio resident Jesse James Leija, but ring announcer Jimmy Lennon Jr., after several tense minutes, said there had been a miscalculation on judge Daniel Van Del Wiele's scorecard. Instead of Nelson winning by 116-115, Van Del Wiele's card should have read 115-115. Leija – who, ironically, is a co-promoter of Alvarez-Trout – thus left the ring with his half a loaf.

Some observers had suggested that there would be a something akin to a riot were Whitaker to win a close decision in the main event. But as round by round went by, with Whitaker employing his signature duck-waddle – instead of moving side to side, he frequently went down on his haunches while Chavez's punches sailed over his head – even the challenger's most vocal partisans sensed that this might not be his night. When Lennon announced the majority draw, the mood in the arena was more of relief than of outrage. The idol of the assembled masses was still technically unbeaten.

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Duva, of course, wasn't buying any of it. "All those officials are regular guys who fly first-class all over the world, to Tokyo or Thailand or whatever, to judge WBC fights," he fumed. "WBC judges will tell you that when they go against the house fighter, they're not chosen to fight another fight for a while. That's the way it's done."

Vann, in his debut column for England's Boxing News, defended – sort of – his scorecard for Whitaker-Chavez without specifically mentioning it.

"Now, after multiple international, British, Commonwealth, European title and 174 world championship fights, you will be able to read about my opinions and see, after all that experience, I still don't have a clue about the fight game," he wrote.

"...referees and judges will always have their critics. We all see the sport differently. Boxing is so subjective, and that subjectivity can vary depending on how you watch a fight. There isn't any black and white in our sport; it is an opinion of a selected few. It has been said that my opinion and verdicts are at times controversial, but they have all been honest, and I stand by them all."

Whitaker and Chavez quite properly have been enshrined in the International Boxing Hall of Fame in Canastota, N.Y. Their plaques would have been hung regardless of what transpired on Dec. 10, 1993. Their body of work is unassailable, and it probably is pointless to speculate on what might have happened for either had there been different judges, or the judges who were on hand had submitted cards with markedly different scores. What was is what is. The draw is on the books, forever.

And, really, Trout is right. He is not Whitaker, and Alvarez is not Chavez. Whether they like it or not, they may have been thrust into predetermined roles, but it is within their power to script their own finish.

Because if we must have reruns, there's always M*A*S*H on TV Land.

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deepwater says:

you must be smoking the arum good stuff to imagine that. trout is no sweet pea and red head is 50 fights away from being mentioned in the same breath as Chavez. these comparisons really hurt the legends so please stop it. keep smoking that good stuff though

Radam G says:

Ditto Deepwater. But Trout is going to beat da double hebejeebeez outta the red-headed hype, and will likely get robbed as teenager Radam G -- sitting in the stadium live and in living color 20 years ago -- saw Sweetpea Whitaker get super jobbed with a draw after he whupped up on the legend Julio Cesar Chavez for a near shutout --remindful of Da Manny shutting out Big Foot.

Syempre -- meaning "of course" -- I hope that a now middle-aged lefty-Radam G -- sitting in the stadium live and in living color -- don't see another lefty robbed in San Tony. Holla!

ali says:

I actually like the comparison Deepwater I know what your saying but there are similarities.

Don Quixote says:

You guys who think Whitaker won should take a reality pill and stop being part of the herd mentality. The fact is that Whitaker held Chavez excessively and should have been penalized by the stupid referee at least three times. Whitaker was a boring fighter who could not fill a closet even in his own back yard.

gibola says:

I see the similarities although with far lower calibre fighters. I was at Chavez-Whittaker and thought Whittaker won but it was close-ish and the negative way Whittaker fought meant I had no sympathy when Chavez fluked the draw. It was poor decision but Whittaker-Ramirez 1 was far worse! PS - I think Canelo will beat Trout by late stoppage. People are reading too much into Trout's win over a shot Cotto.

Radam G says:

It was clinching -- which is a great part of professional boxing. "The stupid referee" was no amateur. The just judges shoulder have got it right. Check it out on Youtube or Daily Motion, and you'll see the truth STILL!

Whitaker WON! Even kids -- in da game -- who was not born then aren't blinded to actuality of reality. Sweetpea WON! Holla!