

All or Nothing

Written by Steve Kim
Monday, 29 November 1999 19:00

They're calling this weeks match-up between Fernando Vargas and Oscar De La Hoya, 'Bad Blood'. And it's not a bad moniker to hang on this fight. But they could have easily have called this one 'All or Nothing'. Because the winner of this grudge match not only takes home both the WBA and WBC jr. middleweight belts, but he raises his reputation, stakes Southern California as their turf and keeps their self-respect and dignity. The last two maybe what's really on the line. To the winner go the spoils, to the loser goes shame and infamy.

The winner goes on to bigger and better things, while the loser, well, he may never live this down. Think about it, if Oscar loses, don't think for one second that the mouthy Vargas won't be rubbing it in till the day he dies. As for Vargas, if he can't beat 'the Golden Boy' all the trash talk he's aimed at De La Hoya will come right back at him ten-fold. And no matter what each fighter may accomplish afterwards, in large part, their careers will be defined by this one fight.

And that's what makes this such a compelling event. Yes, these guys are getting paid well, but the fact that this is so much more than a business deal is what makes this so exciting. Lot's of fighters throughout the years have cashed it in once they secured a payday. Like a Hector Camacho Sr. who's victories were in securing fights with the likes of Felix Trinidad and De La Hoya. As for winning the actual fight? Well, he won when he signed his name on the dotted line for those bouts. In this case we have two fighters who are fighting for so much more. Imagine one of these guys will have to go to bed each night for the rest of his life and live with a loss to the one guy that they can't afford a loss to. Then, to have to wake up each morning and still have that loss on your mind.

Don't believe me? You don't think those types of thoughts carried Joe Frazier to a victory in his first bout against Muhammad Ali? Or that Marvin Hagler still doesn't think about his decision loss to Sugar Ray Leonard? Or that Leonard didn't have a few restless nights after his first professional loss to Roberto Duran? You're best fighters, of any era, have a sense of pride most normal human beings can't comprehend. Why else would they continue to ply their trade at a vocation that is so dangerous when they have millions in the bank? Both Vargas and De La Hoya have earned enough in the ring to live comfortably for the rest of their lives- even more comfortably after this Saturday night. But don't think for one nano-second that all the money in the world would help ease the pain of a loss in this fight.

Their is a sense of desperation for both fighters. De La Hoya has two losses in

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his last two big bouts (against Trinidad and Shane Mosley) and outside interests away from the ring (including a marriage) have had his mind wandering away from this game for some time. One more loss and he probably rides into the sunset and into a full-fledged career in the entertainment industry.

For Vargas, this is a chance to prove that he wasn't irreparably damaged by the lethal left hooks of Trinidad and that he is still one of the premiere fighters in the world pound-for-pound. A loss to De La Hoya, he'll be forever known as that mouthy kid out of Oxnard that was more bark than bite.

Oh, this is gonna be fun.

GAME PLANS

Ok, I'm not Angelo Dundee or Jack Blackburn, but I do play one behind the keyboard. And this is my opinion on what each guy needs to do to have his hand raised this upcoming weekend at the Mandalay Bay.

Fernando Vargas: I think the number one key for him is that he has to be able to consistently avoid and slip Oscar's sharp jab. If he can't do that, it's a long night (or short, for that matter) for 'the Ferocious One'. De La Hoya, doesn't have much of a right hand, so make him beat you with it. If he's able to neutralize Oscars left that should give Fernando an opportunity to get inside and use his advantage in natural size and strength. Now, will that expose a chin that some are questioning after the Trinidad fight? Absolutely, but from what I saw ringside during De La Hoya's bout against Javier Castillejo, I'm almost positive that he doesn't have that type of pop at 154. Also with that new style that De La Hoya now employs, that has his left down by his waist, I'd try and throw as many right hands as possible up top. I don't think Oscar has the fluidity or the smoothness in his upper body to execute that type of style.

Believe it or not, I think Fernando fights a more technical fight than most expect. Why? Well, first of all, he had a huge amateur career that was predicated on his solid boxing skills. And secondly, his best performances against the likes of Yory Boy Campas, Raul Marquez and Ike Quartey have seen him use plenty of movement and savvy.

And one last thing, once he gets inside, go down stairs as many times as possible. Nobody yet, has tested this guy's body consistently and he needs to slowly break down Oscar, who in the past, has had a problem with his stamina.

Oscar De La Hoya: There's an old saying, 'Dance with who brung ya' which means that De La Hoya should be pumping out his jab all fight long and employing his left hook as much as possible - the same left hook that gave Fernando so many problems against Trinidad. The rub being

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that De La Hoya doesn't pack quite the punch of 'Tito'.

The wild card here is just what type of style and strategy he will employ. First of all, he's still trying to learn a new way of boxing from Floyd Mayweather Sr. and he hasn't fought in over 14 months. You get the feeling when it comes down to the nitty-gritty that Oscar will revert to being Oscar. After all, you are, what you are. Which means that Oscar will try to press his advantage in hand and foot speed to out-box Vargas from the outside. It seems like a reasonable plan but remember, in this fight, Vargas is the naturally bigger man. Plenty of questions remain about just how solid a jr.middleweight De La Hoya really is.

But Oscar is still a very good athlete and has found ways to win tough fights before. If all else fails, look for him to use his trademark 'bounce' going in-and-out against Vargas and shooting his jab from the outside. It's conceivable that Oscar could fight the same type of fight that he fought against Trinidad in 99. A fight that many observers feel that he got short-changed in.

SO WHO WINS?

You may call me nuts (believe me, I've been called much worse) but I'm going with Vargas to pull the upset. Based on what I saw against Castillejo last year, I'm not convinced of just how good De La Hoya is at 154. And as he has moved up in weight, there has been a series of diminishing returns. While he was blowing through people at 130-140, from his days as a welterweight, while he has been very good, he's been far from dominant.

Vargas is in peak physical condition and I just think that this will be one of those fights where emotion and hunger win it for the guy who is the underdog on paper. Much like the way Frazier was able to upset Ali and the way Duran was able to maul Leonard in their first bouts, I see a similar scenario playing out for this one.