

The Boxing Year Ahead

Written by Matthew Aguilar
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The year 2006 wasn't a bad one for boxing.

We had the Israel Vasquez-Jhonny Gonzalez slugfest. The Lamon Brewster-Sergei Liakhovich brawl. And the emergence of Manny Pacquiao as an unstoppable beast in the 130-pound division.

But '06 may just be a springboard to an outstanding '07—which promises to deliver the kind of thrills and chills that recent years have only approached.

Here are the most compelling matchups for the new year.

1. Oscar De La Hoya vs. Floyd Mayweather: Why is '07 so promising? Because this gem is already signed, sealed and delivered for May 5 in Las Vegas. This is a fight that boxing needed—a fight that will draw in the casual sports fan and make the fight game meaningful again. Who knows? Maybe Sports Illustrated will take a break from golf and tennis long enough to put a boxing match on its cover again. That's how big this fight is going to be.

It offers all sorts of interesting contrasts and plots and subplots. Mayweather is the pound-for-pound king, but he has never fought at 154 pounds. De La Hoya is bigger, but will have not fought in a year by the time Cinco de Mayo rolls around. Mayweather has never fought anybody with the deadly combination of power, speed and experience that De La Hoya possesses. De La Hoya has never fought anybody with the supreme natural ability of a Mayweather. And, on top of all that, Mayweather's dad, Floyd Sr., will remain as Oscar's trainer. Even he wants to see his son get whopped.

You can say what you want about boxing. But the sporting world's eyes will be fixed on a patch of blue canvas on the first Saturday in May. And maybe that will be the impetus that catapults boxing to a bigger stage.

2. Marco Antonio Barrera vs. Manny Pacquiao 2: Surprising that this one would be so anticipated, considering the pounding that Pacquiao administered to Barrera three years ago. But, again, boxing needs this fight. Pacquiao is probably boxing's second-best pound-for-pound fighter behind Mayweather. And he is one of its top draws, along with De La Hoya. His chief nemesis is Barrera, one of the top fighters of his generation and one of the best pugilists in Mexican boxing history. This fight is a natural, and needs to happen before either (especially Barrera) gets older. Besides, Marco has maintained since '03 that his mountain of distractions leading up to the Pacquiao fight were the reasons for his horrible performance. He may have a point. He has yet to look that bad since. So, let's see, once and for all, who the better man is.

3. Wladimir Klitschko-Nicolay Valuev: We have to throw a heavyweight matchup in the mix, and what better spectacle than these two behemoths in the ring together? Klitschko is 6-foot-7, 245 pounds. Valuev is 7-foot, 325 pounds. And both hold heavyweight title belts. A showdown

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between the giants would go a long way in determining a legitimate heavyweight champion. Klitschko would be a favorite, since his skills are proven. But Valuev is more than just a circus-act, as he proved against Monte Barrett. The guy can do some things. It'd be more competitive than Klitschko-Calvin Brock, that's for sure.

4. Bernard Hopkins-Joe Calzaghe: Sadly, this one will probably never happen. Hopkins has gone on record saying that he doesn't see the point, that Calzaghe doesn't get him juiced up. (And Oleg Maskaev does?) Too bad. Because this would be as intriguing a showdown as boxing can offer. Calzaghe is a southpaw who demonstrated his ability in a March slashing of Jeff Lacy. He's got incredibly fast hands, and throws them in rat-a-tat-tat combination that makes life miserable for opponents. Hopkins, of course, is the master boxer who, despite his 40-plus years, is as well preserved as any fighter in boxing. The king of the middleweight division for more than a decade, including a record 20 title defenses, would the "Executioner" be able to devise a plan to beat Calzaghe? Besides that, Joe is younger and naturally bigger. Here's hoping that B-Hop changes his mind.

5. Jermain Taylor-Winky Wright 2: The first fight, fought last June, was a classic. Both men displayed power, speed, and boxing skill. As well as grit and toughness. But, as fair as the draw verdict was, it was completely unsatisfying for the fighters and the fans. Wright, who incorrectly complained about the decision initially and sulked for a while, seems to be coming to terms with a Taylor rematch. He was typically brilliant against the smaller Ike Quartey two weeks ago, while Taylor appeared raw and amateurish in a decision over tough Kassim Ouma last week. Both remain in the pound-for-pound top five. All they need now is a boxing ring in which to fight. Let's get it done, guys.

6. Miguel Cotto-Antonio Margarito: Well, for those of us who severely underestimated Cotto and picked him to lose on Dec. 2 against Carlos Quintana, it's time to eat crow. And praise Cotto. What a performance the Puerto Rican sensation turned in, boxing brilliantly before putting the hurt on Quintana in the form of devastating body shots. There is no doubt now that Cotto is a welterweight—a huge welterweight who looks as strong and wide as an ox. Moving up from 140 to 147 pounds was the best decision Cotto could make. So what would happen against Margarito, another big, strong, hard-punching fighter who is hungry for stardom? The edge probably goes to Cotto, since Margarito struggled with the unranked Joshua Clottey, and often looked wild. But a Cotto-Margarito showdown would rekindle memories of classic Puerto Rican-Mexican showdowns like Julio Cesar Chavez-Edwin Rosario and Pipino Cuevas-Angel Espada. Besides, they have to wait for De La Hoya and Mayweather to finish their business anyway.

7. Ricky Hatton-Jose Luis Castillo: Lucky for boxing fans, Hatton abandoned his ill-advised hop up to welterweight and is back where he belongs at 140 pounds. Also lucky for boxing fans, Castillo stopped starving himself and is also campaigning at junior welterweight. The result, if they ever fight, could be one of the greatest wars in division history. How could it miss? The Englishman Hatton, with his relentless, bull-like style, vs. the Mexican Castillo, the seasoned, hard-punching veteran who is one of the toughest, hardest fighters of his generation. You'd have to go with Hatton, because he's younger and naturally bigger. But Castillo has made a career of doing the unexpected (upsetting Stevie Johnston in 2000, upsetting Mayweather in

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'02—even though he didn't get the decision; and upsetting Diego Corrales in the rematch). And he is a three-time lightweight champ. A war for sure.

8. Jorge Arce-Vic Darchinyan: Like Hopkins vs. Calzaghe, Arce vs. Darchinyan will probably never happen. Why? Well, Arce, after years struggling to make the flyweight limit of 112 pounds, moved up to junior bantamweight and the more comfy 115. Darchinyan, meanwhile, remains at flyweight, destroying everything in his wake. It's too bad. Arce, unpredictable, powerful and strong, would have been Darchinyan's most difficult challenge. There's still a possibility that, if enough money is dangled in front of their faces, it could happen. But both have other options (Lorenzo Parra and Pongsaklek Wongjonkam for Darchinyan and Nobuo Nashiro for Arce), and will probably pursue those.

9. Israel Vasquez-Jhonny Gonzalez 2: Why the hell not? Their first fight was filled enough violence to make Wes Craven cringe. And the end, with Vasquez rallying dramatically to save his title, was one of the best in-fight comebacks of recent memory. By virtue of the rematch rule (once a fighter is knocked out, he is usually knocked out faster in the rematch), you'd have to favor Vasquez. But Gonzalez was winning the fight for nine rounds. Maybe he can come up with another game plan.

10. Shane Mosley vs. winner of De La Hoya-Mayweather: There are some who believe that Mosley matches up better with Mayweather than does De La Hoya. Why? Because of his speed. Oscar still has some quickness, but not like "Sugar" Shane, who seemed to rediscover his blurring combinations in his rematch with Fernando Vargas. And, last we saw, Mayweather the speed demon didn't react well to speedy, aggressive opponents (remember the first four rounds of the Zab Judah fight?). Mosley isn't Judah. He's big, strong, determined and takes a hell of a punch. And he's been fighting guys twice his size (Winky Wright), so fighting someone smaller like Mayweather would be welcomed.

And, if De La Hoya upsets Mayweather? Nothing better than a defining rubber match. De La Hoya can't be thrilled about losing to Sugar twice, the second time controversially (some say dubiously). What about their Golden Boy partnership, you ask? Well, when millions of dollars are to be made, and a chance for a company to grow by leaps and bounds exists, that partnership makes even more sense. De La Hoya-Mosley 3? This is boxing. Stranger things have happened.