Johnny Tapia reminds me of a guy who always arrives at the airport five minutes before his flight is due to leave. There's a certain amount of desperation in the way he acts and talks, as though his time is running short. He has an intensity that makes you think his light will burn out long before he finds his way out of the darkness. He's like a 4-year-old with a big bag of chocolates, a Wall Street commodities broker on a black-coffee binge.

If you passed Tapia on the street on a bad day, you'd figure him for either a hopped-up street thug or a hard-case looking for a fist fight.

Tapia fights Marco Antonio Barrera on Nov. 2 at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas. It's one of those fights everyone wants to see, even if there are no silly belts at stake. They want to see this match because in a fight game full of big disappointments, tough guys like Tapia and Barrera have seldom let us down. That's all you can ask of a fighter, but it's also the least you should expect.

If you're going to pick a winner, start with age. At 34, Tapia (58-2-2, 28 KOs) is the old man in this matchup, a guy who looks like he spent most of his career running into closed doors and right hands. He's got one of those tell-tale, flat noses that has been broken more times than a Don King promise.

Tapia has also spent some time as guest of the state, given free room and board for deeds unbecoming of a champion. He never sang in the church choir.

A resident of Albuquerque, N.M., Tapia is like the town he lives in, a little rough around the edges, but easy to like once you get to know it.

He's been fighting inside the ring since 1988 and fighting outside it all his life. And he's had his share of wars. They take something out of a fighter and they've taken something from Tapia.

Still, he has this crazy idea he can lick any man in the room and he's usually right. A four-time world champion, he recently lost the IBF featherweight title because he failed to take on the mandatory challenger. Instead, he's fighting one of the best fighters in the world.

Barrera (55-3, 39 KOs) is 27, quiet and a southpaw out of Mexico City. Known as a boxer/puncher (which is what just about every fighter likes to consider himself) he's at the age where he's as good as he's ever going to be, and that's pretty damn good.

His biggest win was a decision over Erik Morales earlier this year, a rematch of their

“fight of the year,” in February 2000, Morales winning a controversial split decision in what was a super-bantamweight title fight.

Barrera also has one of those left hooks to the body that could disable a Lexus.

If there’s a weakness, it might be his chin. It’s been cracked. While Tapia has never been stopped, Barrera had problems with Junior Jones, who knocked him down twice before their fight was stopped in the fifth round when Barrera’s corner climbed into the ring.

The winner? Anyone lucky enough to watch this fight on HBO.