

As the highly anticipated December 8 welterweight title fight between “Pretty Boy” Floyd Mayweather, 38-0 (24 KOS), and Ricky “The Hitman” Hatton, 43-0 (31 KOS), draws near, the excitement is palpable.

It is hard to tell if the excitement is caused more by the public’s disdain for the immensely boorish Mayweather or the reverence in which Hatton is held by his diehard British fans.

With Mayweather casting himself as the villain, this bout has become a morality tale. Can the soft-spoken and down-to-earth, but fiercely determined Hatton outgun the arrogant and bombastic but extremely gifted Mayweather?

Because of the highly-rated preview series “24/7” that HBO has been running for the past few weeks Hatton has developed scores of American fans, most of whom are hungering to see him shut Mayweather’s mouth for good.

There are lots of tangibles in this fight, many of which are not so obvious. What is obvious is that, on paper at least, Hatton should be tailor made for Mayweather to look good against.

There is no better counter-puncher in the game, and hitting the Pretty Boy solidly can prove to be a lesson in futility.

While most boxing insiders see Mayweather winning one of his patented lopsided decisions, perhaps they should consider the fact that Hatton’s demeanor makes it apparent that he has never been more up for a challenge in his life.

Others believe that Mayweather’s candid talk about his brittle hands and his body breaking might be his way of laying the groundwork for an excuse should Hatton win.

Even more point to Mayweather’s flashiness, especially his annoying propensity to display his wealth, as signs of emotional weakness, a trait that a hell-bent warrior like Hatton could exploit.

Here’s what a random group of 20 boxing insiders have to say:

Nick Charles, ShoBox: The New Generation commentator: “Mayweather is the best fighter in the world, but even the best fighters have to lose sometime, so why not now? I know this pick might not make sense to some people. Hatton didn’t look good against (Luis) Colazzo and he beat Castillo who was on his last legs. But I think his pressure accumulation won’t allow Mayweather to do what he does best. I’m going out on a limb, but my gut says Hatton stops Mayweather. Hatton by TKO.

Steve Farhood, ShoBox: The New Generation commentator: “Hatton will try to make it interesting, but it will be a frustratingly boring fight because Mayweather simply won’t cooperate.

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When Hatton applies pressure, Mayweather will respond in one of three ways: holding, running or punching. The first two are far more likely than the third." Mayweather W 12.

Gerry Cooney, former heavyweight title challenger: "Hatton is a tough kid, but Mayweather should be able to pick him apart and chop him up. Hatton will keep him on the ropes all night long, but Mayweather will pot shot him and probably stop him on cuts in the seventh or eighth round." Mayweather by TKO.

Iran Barkley, former multi-division champion: "Mayweather won't knock Hatton out, but he will beat him. It won't come easy, but Mayweather will make it look easy. Mayweather don't have power like Hatton, but he's got speed and he knows how to make things happen. If Mayweather's hands don't fail him, he might be able to cut and stop Hatton, but I'm leaning toward a decision." Mayweather W 12.

David Diaz, WBC lightweight champion: "Floyd does very well against guys that come at him. I see him maneuvering a lot on the ropes and clearly outboxing Hatton. Floyd is a great defensive fighter on the ropes. He rolls real well and has tunnel vision, so he sees everything coming." Mayweather W 12.

Willie Savannah, manager/trainer of lightweight champion Juan Diaz: "We are pulling for Ricky because he'd be a great fight down the road for Juan if he won. My heart says Ricky because he's so determined, but my mind says Floyd. He just has too much speed, but I think the fight will be a lot closer than most people think." Mayweather W 12.

Calvin Brock, heavyweight contender: "If anyone can beat Mayweather, it's Hatton. This will be a much better fight than Mayweather's fight with (Oscar) De La Hoya. This is the toughest match Mayweather's ever been in, and I think it's a toss-up, but (if forced) I will pick Hatton by decision." Hatton W 12.

Bruce Silverglade, owner of Gleason's Gym: "Even though my heart wants to go with the underdog and pick Hatton, my head says that Mayweather has what it takes to beat him. I think that Hatton is a very good fighter, but Mayweather is just a little better in all areas." Mayweather W 12.

Hector Roca, trainer: "Ricky's only chance is to knock Floyd out, but Floyd is too smart to let that happen. Ricky will be very tough on Floyd and the fight will be very entertaining, but Floyd should outpoint him." Mayweather W 12.

Yuri Foreman: junior middleweight contender: "Floyd will box and move, but Hatton's pressure will eventually overcome and he will catch up to him. Hatton will press the action all night long and win a decision." Hatton W 12.

Dave Selwyn, manager of female boxers Eileen Olszewski, Ronica Jeffrey and Cristy Nickle: "The fight won't even be close. Hatton will be lucky to win one round. Mayweather has way too much hand and foot speed and basic skills. He will avoid Hatton's punches all night long." Mayweather W 12.

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Eileen Olszewski, top-rated female flyweight contender: "Hatton will be relentless in cutting off the ring and he will never stop punching. But Mayweather has seen this before, and he will know what to do. Hatton will give Mayweather a really hard time, but Mayweather will get the decision in a very competitive fight." Mayweather W 12.

Emile Griffith, former multi-division champion: "Floyd is the best in the world and he will show everyone why he is the best. After the fight, he will still be the best." Mayweather W 12.

Joey Gamache, former WBA lightweight champion: "Mayweather has tremendous speed and boxing abilities, and he is good enough to only fight as hard as he has to and win. Now that he's getting a little older, I think he'll settle down on his punches a bit more. I wouldn't be surprised if we see a more aggressive Mayweather in this fight." Mayweather W 12.

Andy Lee, undefeated middleweight prospect: "Everything points to Mayweather, but I'm not all that convinced about his desire at this stage of his career. He has lots of money and outside interests, which could distract him. Things like one's mentality and determination still count for something in this sport. This will be Hatton's night." Hatton W 12.

Sean Sullivan, Editor-in-Chief of Boxing Digest magazine: "Hatton will try to smother Mayweather and get inside his reach, but Mayweather is way too smart to let that happen. He'll move around the ring a lot and nullify Hatton's style. The only way Hatton can win is to pin Mayweather on the ropes and club him all night long. I don't see that happening." Mayweather W 12.

John Scully, trainer and former light heavyweight title challenger: "A lot of people are picking Hatton to win because they don't like Mayweather. As good and tough as Hatton is, Mayweather is even better than he gets credit for. He's a lot like Sugar Ray Leonard and Muhammad Ali; he's tough at heart and will fight hard when he has to. The same rap against Mayweather was said about Roy Jones; that he didn't want to mix it up. Roy actually loved to fight guys who would come at him the way Hatton will come at Mayweather. So does Mayweather. Look what he did to (Jose Luis) Castillo in their rematch and Diego Corrales. A lot of people thought they would beat Mayweather. When he needs to step up, he steps up. There's no way that Hatton will be able to steamroll him." Mayweather W 12.

Teddy B. Blackburn, photographer: "Hatton will give it all he's got, and Pretty Boy will have to work for it but he is way too fast and will stop Hatton on cuts in the middle of the eighth round." Mayweather TKO 8 Hatton.

Mike Silver, noted boxing historian: "The key to the fight is speed, and Mayweather's speed of foot speed is even more important than his hand speed. Hatton has to pressure Mayweather into defeat, but I don't think he has the skills to do that. He will be consistently hit with counter-punches and lose a one-sided decision." Mayweather W 12.

Bob Mladinich, TSS writer. "See Nick Charles's description for my take on the fight. I couldn't have said it better. If Glen Johnson could beat Roy Jones, Hatton can beat Mayweather." Hatton W 12.

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Total: 20

Mayweather: 15

Hatton: 5

Mayweather by TKO: 2

Hatton by TKO: 1