The winding roads from San Bernardino, California escalate upwards along Highway 330 through fearless landscape and dense sections of soaring pine trees. The route comes to a climax at Big Bear Lake, a picturesque location devoid from the distractions of city life, making it an ideal location for a boxer deep in preparation for a crucial prizefight.

“Arrrgh!”

The voluble noise grabs Cristobal Arreola’s attention. The groans emanating from the television belong to Eric “Butterbean” Esch as he tangles with Dennis Rodman on the Hulk Hogan Celebrity Championship Wrestling TV show.

The clamour from the television set was the only distraction for Riverside native Arreola as he tuned his body and mind for the heavyweight showdown with Florida’s Travis Walker.

“There’s nothing to do [in Big Bear] but train, sleep and eat,” said Arreola at his lakeside condo two weeks before the fight in Ontario, California. “A couple of days ago [myself and trainer Henry Ramirez] went to a bar at 8:30pm and there was nobody there. If you go to a bar at 8:30 in Riverside it’s packed. There are still people walking around the streets at that time.

“Here, my entertainment is TV, video games and movies. That’s it.”

On Saturday it was the 5,400 crowd at the Citizens Business Bank Arena that was entertained by a dramatic slugfest between Arreola and Walker. Despite being outfought in the first round and felled in the second, Arreola rallied back to stop Walker 13 seconds into the third frame.

The 6’4 Arreola has generally weighed 240 pounds at fight time, but for the Walker fight he scaled in excess of 250 for the second consecutive contest. Arreola looked fleshy and unconditioned and after two and a half rounds of one-sided action his goal of becoming the first Mexican-American heavyweight champion was on the verge of decimation.

The unbeaten Arreola has been accused in some circles of having a lackadaisical attitude to training in conjunction with limited boxing skills and modest punching power.

But on Saturday he proved that despite his physical appearance, his resolve is at peak form as he absorbed the accurate power-shots of Walker and with gritty determination forced his body to engender a series of bone-rattling combinations.

The solitude at Big Bear may have refined Arreola’s strength of mind, but the foundations were solidified at a much earlier stage.

“I got into boxing so I could beat my dad’s ass,” he told the Press Enterprise earlier this year.

Agustín Arreola first brought his son to a boxing gym when Chris was four years old, and some years later when the youngster suggested quitting the sport his proposition was met by a left hook to the jaw. Agustín contends that Chris wanted to leave boxing to join a street gang and admits to weeping when he looks at his son's first boxing robe.

But the hardest blow Arreola has endured in his 27-year life was no punch.

In October of last year he decided to leave a house party while his best friend, Alex Carranza, remained behind. Soon after, a gunman reportedly opened fire on the attendees. Carranza sought to protect a nearby girl and covered her with his hulking 260-pound frame. But his sizeable physique was no match for the bullets.

Arreola arrived back at the house just in time to watch his companion die.

"I was looking at him and there was nothing I could do to help," he said.

Arreola, 26-0 (23), claims to feel no fear in advance of fights, but ahead of the Walker showdown he admitted to getting nervous before sparring sessions. Arreola feels under more pressure when training in Big Bear as the lack of diversions focuses his mind on fighting and nothing else.

"I get really nervous before I spar. I get real tense," he revealed. "In sparring there's more thinking involved, but in the fight it's more on instinct. On the day of the fight I love to sleep in. The only thing I have to do is make sure I've got new underwear and new socks."

Arreola hopes to soon get the opportunity to carry out that ritual before a title fight against one of the enormous Klitschko brothers. And he has no qualms about travelling overseas and fighting in a new environment against either of the Ukrainians.

"I'd travel anywhere," he stated. "It would take me a while to get used to the climate, the time change. I'd go there about a month before the fight, that way I'd have no excuses."

While Arreola may need to modify his routine in preparation for a fight against Wladimir or Vitali, his fight strategy would remain unchanged.

"You've got to back [the Klitschkos] up as much as possible and stay in their chest," he explained. "I won't let them stretch their big arms."

Either of the Klitschko brothers would enjoy a wide advantage over Arreola in every measurable department, from size to skill. But on one intangible Arreola has a clear lead over every active heavyweight; heart.