

Peru's National Hero Kina Malpartida Defends Title

Written by David A. Avila

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Peru comes to California.

The South American country where llamas roam among the Andes and the Incas once ruled now has its first world champion and her name is Kina Malpartida.

On Saturday, Dec. 5, Malpartida defends her world title against Great Britain's Lyndsey Scragg (10-1, 3 KOs) at the Citizen's Business Bank Arena in Ontario. The fight will not be televised locally but will be shown nationally in her native Peru.

Expect an entire country to be watching their national hero.

How did it happen?

Nine months ago Malpartida entered Madison Square Garden as the big underdog and emerged as the new junior lightweight world champion. In her previous fight at the San Manuel Casino, she suffered a knockdown in the last round and lost a close fight. But all her losses and disappointments were completely erased when she beat Maureen Shea.

On her return home to Peru as she stepped off the plane Malpartida didn't know what to expect after winning the WBA junior lightweight world title and becoming her country's first and only world champion.

For years the tall rather shy Malpartida had toiled alone often shunted aside by trainers and sometimes ridiculed by other boxers as she continued her quest to become a champion.

When confronted with thousands of fans she realized her life had changed as television crews and media representatives crowded the airport to get a glimpse of its new national hero.

"She's big," said Armando Huerta, a California native who trains Malpartida.

"I still can't believe it," says Malpartida (10-3, 3 KOs) who is defending her title for the second time.

"It's amazing to me," said Malpartida, 29, who has been training in Southern California the past four years and is now a regular at the Maywood Boxing Gym.

Since winning the title the Peruvian champion was given a whirlwind tour of all the major cities of her native country and became a daily fixture on tabloid television, newspapers and magazines. It's been a shock.

"In Peru there were lots of parades and I went to all of the cities and met all of the mayors. I even met the president," Malpartida said. "My last fight was in the National Stadium."

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Malpartida beat Brazil's Halana Dos Santos in front of thousands of fans by a seventh round technical knockout this past June. Now she faces England's Scragg who is searching for her first world title.

"She's a good fighter. She comes forward and is not tall," said Malpartida of her next opponent Scragg. "I know she is very tough if she fought Jelena Mrdjenovich."

At the Maywood Boxing Gym a dozen reporters from Peru milled around the crowded the fighters who were waiting in line to spar. One cameraman kept his large black video camera pointed at Malpartida at all times as if fearful he might lose an important moment.

Huerta, whose son Charles Huerta is a young prospect with Golden Boy Promotions, said he was thoroughly shocked when he arrived in Peru last June to prepare his protégé for a fight.

"She can't walk the streets without being recognized," said Huerta who also was recognized daily while in Lima, Peru. "The paparazzi are always following her."

In California the rather quiet female boxer used to be able to travel freely. Now the Peruvian newshounds follow her wherever she goes. She was on the cover of Time Magazine in South America. She's that big.

"I was thinking I'm a very fortunate girl to be from a country that hasn't had a lot of champions," said Malpartida as she was saturated with adulation during her last stay in her native country. "It's really taken me by surprise."

Malpartida remembers being tossed aside by trainers, given phony visas by former managers and told she was not very good. Until she met Huerta she doubted herself.

"Now I know the secret," Malpartida says. "Boxing is a mind game. You have to believe in yourself."

One girl who spars with the Peruvian is Moreno Valley's Kaliesha "Wild Wild" West, a bantamweight with speed and power.

"She has a good jab," says West, who fights on Dec. 12 in Palm Springs. "After a four-punch combination she gets out of there."

It's Malpartida's combination of grace, skill and mental confidence that have made her the first world champion from Peru.

"I knew I was going to be a champion," Malpartida said.

The doors open at Citizen Business Bank Arena at 3 p.m. For more information (909) 244-5500.

Fights on television

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Thurs. Versus, 7 p.m., Maureen Shea (13-2) vs. Jenna Shiver (9-4-1).

Fri. Showtime, 10 p.m., Mauricio Herrera (13-0) vs. Mike Anchondo (29-2).

Fri. Telemundo 11:30 p.m., Cosme Rivera (31-13-2) vs. Euri Gonzalez (19-1-1).

Sat. HBO, 7 p.m., Paul Williams (37-1) vs. Sergio Martinez (44-1-2); Chris Arreola (27-1) vs. Brian Minto (34-2).