

If Life Was Fair, Miguel Espino Would Win Saturday Night

Written by Ron Borges

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It will be easy to root for Miguel Espino Saturday night when he challenges middleweight champion Kelly Pavlik in Youngstown, Ohio. It is nearly impossible to believe he has a chance to win.

That is the sad reality for Espino, a 29-year-old, hard-scrabble kid from North Hollywood, CA., who is by all accounts a good fighter and a world champion of a guy. Unfortunately, the world not being the fairest of places, such fellows only infrequently become world champions inside a boxing ring.

Espino was among the first cast of "The Contender" series but has never really been a contender anywhere but on a reality TV show. Even Saturday night, ranked No. 3 in the world by the World Boxing Council, the fact is he's still not. He is a fighter with an opportunity but no chance, which he knows is how he got this \$100,000 payday from promoter Bob Arum.

To his credit, Espino neither bemoans this nor ignores it. He told Kevin Iole, the great boxing writer at Yahoo.com, last week that, "I don't think they're bringing me in to win. But the great thing about boxing is when the bell rings everything is equal."

Not really. Talent is not equal. Promotional clout behind you is not equal. Judging in a situation like this, where the money lies all behind one man, is not equal.

Espino understands this of course just as he understands why Arum called him just as he sat down to eat a lunch of tacos and a Coke a few weeks ago as he was relaxing from the job of sparring with Julio Cesar Chavez, Jr., whom Espino was helping prepare for his next fight.

Arum asked if he would be willing to fight Pavlik, who has not fought since February and was supposed to be facing top-rated Paul Williams instead of Espino, until an ongoing battle with a staph infection in his knuckle forced him to pull out of that fight.

What is odd about that is the fight was scheduled for early December. The champion was too hurt to fight that night but could come back two weeks later to face Espino? Makes you wonder.

It doesn't make Espino wonder however, because he understands it was neither his No. 3 ranking nor his 20-2-1 record that got him this fight. What got him the fight is that he has only nine knockouts to his credit. Paul Williams has 27 knockouts. Enough said.

Yet Espino is the kind of guy you want to hope for because a win like this would change his life and his family's in a meaningful way. This is a guy who has never made any real money in boxing but who has fought on through disappointment after disappointment. He is a guy who moved in with his blind mother after she got divorced to help care for her. His sister left a top college, Carlton in Minnesota, to do the same, losing a year's worth of hard-earned credits to attend Cal State-Fullerton in the process.

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This is a family in the best sense of the word, the kind that sticks together and sacrifices for each other. Espino is the head of that household now and so he comes to Youngstown with hope laced with hard reality.

“I thought I was going to go to big fights after “The Contender” and TV fights but that wasn’t the case,” he recalled recently. “I had to fight local fights and in Mexico in little stadiums of 500 people. I kept working hard and look at me now. We are fighting for the middleweight championship of the world. My last fight was on Telemundo.”

That fight was seen by few. This one may be as well because it’s on pay-per-view six days before Christmas. It’s on pay-per-view not because Arum thinks it will sell but because he couldn’t sell it to HBO, who normally televises Pavlik’s title defenses.

Espino knows that too but what he is holding firmly to is the knowledge that if you hit a guy right everything can go wrong for that guy in an instant. Espino and his family have been hit that way in life a few times. Now he’d like to return the favor to Pavlik, who enters the ring in Youngstown after the longest layoff of his career and amidst rumors of a lifestyle gone a bit off the tracks.

Will any of that make a difference once the first bell sounds? Not likely, but Miguel Espino figures getting this fight wasn’t very likely either so, who knows?

“Any fighter that is in the ring has a shot,” Espino said. “He’s the champion but do I have a shot? Absolutely. Am I going there to win? Absolutely. I’m not going in there just to receive the biggest payday of my career or just to say I fought the world champion and gave him a tough fight. I wouldn’t be in this game if I were to do that.

“I’m going to Ohio to give the best performance of my life. God willing I am going to come back with the belts (WBC and WBO). That’s what I’ve been training for.”

Surely he has, but unfortunately for Miguel Espino God is not much of a fight fan. God hopefully will watch over and protect both Espino and Pavlik Saturday night--but as a priest at ringside once said when asked if a fighter who had just knelt down and made the sign of the cross before the opening bell would be aided by that said, “Only if he can fight.”

Miguel Espino is a fighter, both in the ring and more importantly in life. He’s doing the right thing in that North Hollywood apartment for his Mom and for his family. If life was fair he would win Saturday night. But this is boxing, a place where fairness seldom has much to do with the outcome.

Might Pavlik be tentative because of his 10-month layoff and be unsure of how well his now repaired hand will hold up? Yes, he might be. Will that be enough to turn the tide in favor of a guy who, relative to his peers, can’t punch?

The answer to that we already know.