THE SETTING:

Nearly all great fighters are eventually knocked off their pedestal by a younger, hungrier opponent. This Saturday, at the Reliant Arena in Houston, Texas, Mexican legend Erik Morales will be hoping to prove that it's not yet time for him to be knocked off, when he defends his 140 pound title against unbeaten rising star Danny Garcia. The bout will be televised by HBO.

Greatness can be an overused word in boxing. But when it comes to the career of Erik Morales, 52-7, [36 kos] there are few better words with which to describe him. Morales, a sure fire hall-of-famer, has just about done it all. Starting with his first world title at the age of 21, with a win over Daniel Zaragoza in 1997, Morales went onto establish himself as one of the best Mexican fighters of this or any era. While he is most famous for his grueling trilogy with Mexican rival Marco Antonio Barrera, which remains his most compelling body of work, his upset win over Manny Pacquiao back in 2005 [Morales remains the only fighter to defeat Pacquiao in America] may well be his best.

For a time, it looked like it was also his last.

After three defeats fights in a row [Zahir Raheem and Pacquiao twice] Morales stepped up to the lightweight division where he challenged titlist David Diaz. Despite being the more skilled fighter, Morales ended up on the wrong side of a unanimous decision. It was his fourth defeat in a row. Consequently, Morales retired from boxing.

Mounting a comeback in 2010, against far less talented opposition, Morales won three fights in a row. Looking less than impressive in each, the old warrior it seemed, could no longer compete at the highest level.

Heading into his fight with the hard punching Marcos Maidana, Morales was deemed nothing more than a sacrificial lamb being led to its slaughter. So much so, many feared for Morales' safety. Defiantly, and against the odds, Morales put on an outstanding display. Displaying his old warrior spirit, " El Terrible " competed on even terms with one of the most feared fighters in boxing. Although he lost a majority decision, there were those who thought Morales deserved the win. Last time out, back in September of last year, 36 year-old Morales became the first Mexican four weight world champion [bantamweight, featherweight, super featherweight and junior welterweight] when he defeated Pablo Cesar Cano for the vacant 140 pound title. His place in Canastota is well beyond doubt.

By the time Philadelphian prospect Danny Garcia, 22-0 [14 kos] made his professional debut in 2007, Erik Morales was already three months into his supposed retirement. Appearing mainly as an undercard attraction, Garcia quickly set tongues wagging with his crowd pleasing, knockout ending performances. Garcia dominated his early opposition, remaining untested until

his sixteenth pro contest, in a tough split decision win over England's Ashley Theophane.

Garcia continued his winning ways with four consecutive stoppage victories, before taking a significant step up in competition against former lightweight title holder, Nate Campbell. With Campbell clearly past his best, the younger Garcia dominated the action throughout, winning by a wide unanimous decision.

Last time out, in what was on paper, the biggest test of his young career, Garcia took on the hard hitting Kendall Holt. Although Garcia won by split decision, the fight was not as close as the official result suggests. Garcia outworked Holt from start to finish, in what was a very good showing against a dangerous opponent.

Defeat for Morales at this stage in his career could make this fight his last. A win, and there is a strong possibility we may finally see Morales versus Juan Manuel Marquez, the missing piece of this era's featherweight jigsaw puzzle [Barerra, Pacquiao, Morales, Marquez]. Garcia on the other hand, will be doing his upmost to make sure that the wishes of most boxing fans are not granted.

THE SCIENCE:

Morales, fighting out of an orthodox stance, has changed his style somewhat over the years. Where Morales was once a take two to land one ultra aggressor, age, wear and tear and experience have resulted in him becoming more of a ring strategist. Still a blood-and-guts warrior, a lot of Morales' Tijuana tenacity has been replaced with technique. A smart counterpuncher, Morales is effective with a variety of punches. His jab, either to create distance or set up other punches, has been featured a lot more of late. His lack of speed is well compensated by the accuracy of his punches. While he is not thought to be in the same league as Juan Manuel Marquez when it comes to combination punching, Morales can still let the punches flow. His straight right hand, along with his right uppercut, could well be his best shots. Morales' left hook to the body, which, like most of his shots, is not devastating, has enough power to keep an opponent honest. A creative fighter, Morales likes to disguise his left uppercut behind a straight right hand feint. This served Morales extremely well against Marcos Maidana.

Defensively, Morales has improved significantly over the years. Where at one time his answer to defense was more offense, Morales now shows a lot more responsibility when it comes to defending. Refusing to take a step back during his early years, Morales, using his footwork, is now very effective at creating angles and distance to mute offense. Even with his back to the ropes, Morales is very calm under pressure. Rather than simply rally back with offense, Morales prefers to slip and roll with the punches. Maidana, one of the better inside fighters in boxing, found it difficult to land clean on Morales when he was up on the ropes.

Like Morales, Garcia is an orthodox boxer-puncher. His blend of speed and power make him a formidable opponent for anyone at 140 pounds. Garcia's lead left hook, thrown either upstairs or down, is his most fluid and effective punch. Garcia also mixes his left handed attack up with a well timed overhand right. Because of his strong amateur pedigree, he looks extremely comfortable in the ring. Capable of fighting going forward or backing up, Garcia can adapt to his opponent's style. While he can keep the fight at a distance behind his jab, Garcia's best work may be done in close. A committed body puncher, using his left hand in particular, Garcia can reduce his opponent's activity levels during the fight. He is also very effective at countering on the inside. By bending at the waist, Garcia can slip a punch, and immediately counter with a left hook. As a result of his above average handspeed, Garcia has a way of turning his left jab into a lead left hook at the last second. His left hand attack cannot be overstated.

Although not a defensive wizard, because of good footwork, good balance and good reflexes, Garcia's defense is above average. He can step out of range or use upper body movement to evade punches. While he sometimes carries his hands a little low, Garcia's understanding of ring generalship, in particular, his ability to move off at an angle after throwing, has kept him from being in any real trouble thus far.

THE SCENARIO:

While Morales holds the advantage in craftsmanship and experience, Garcia possesses the advantages that go with youth. Speed is the biggest equalizer in sports. Technique can trump power, but speed can trump technique.

Morales has experienced both cases.

Against Marcos Maidana, technique trumped power. Doing his best impression of Carmen Basillio against Ray Robinson and with his eye badly swollen, it appeared Morales had rolled back the years. He came within an inch of defeating the most feared man in the 140 pound division. On reflection, Morales, using his superior technique, took advantage of Maidana's wildness. Where Maidana was plodding forward with no head movement, throwing wide, easily read punches, Morales was using angles, throwing straight punches down the middle. Maidana's lack of speed and eagerness to load up on his punches was there to be taken advantage of. On the other hand, against Manny Pacquiao, Erik Morales' superior technique was rendered useless by Pacquiao's speed and power. Unable to keep up with the younger man, Morales' own lack of speed was taken advantage of. In his last outing, Morales looked far from convincing against a fighter who can be considered a full one or two levels below himself. Yet because of Cano's speed and movement, the fight was fought on even terms for longer than it really should have been.

Erik Morales is 36 years old. More importantly, an OLD 36 years old. He has been involved in so many tough wars during his career, that it is hard to believe Morales is twelve years Bernard Hopkins' junior. Combine this with the fact that Morales is really a super feather/lightweight fighting at junior welter by being overweight, and you get a true understanding of what he will be up against when he meets Garcia.

Of course, there are some areas of Garcia's game that Morales could exploit. Garcia, like Maidana, throws wide looping punches, mainly his lead left hook. If Morales can take a step to his left, and get his right shoulder in line with Garcia's centre, his straight right hand could find a home. Alternatively, Morales could take advantage of Garcia's lack of head movement, and low left hand, by throwing an overhand right. Then there is Morales' tremendous resiliency. Garcia has never been involved in anything like what Morales has been through. If Morales can make it a war, Garcia may find himself out of his depth.

In reality, Morales' strong showing against Maidana was down to a conflict in styles and skill, not age and youth, as Morales will likely be a victim of against Garcia.

Ultimately, Danny Garcia should be too big, too fast, too strong and too energetic for Morales. Garcia's speed and intelligence will likely keep him from getting into the trenches with Morales. Garcia will employ lateral movement, and lots of it. Garcia will be throwing volume... with speed, then moving off at angles...with speed.

Speed kills, and that's an asset missing in Morales' work.

Morales will probably be competitive early on, even placing doubt in Garcia's head. Utilising patience and timing, along with his well placed jab and right hand, Morales will be doing his best trying to convince everyone that he has Garcia figured out.

However, around the mid way point, the fight will change course.

With Morales unable to keep up with the pace of the fight, there will be more urgency in Garcia's work; by throwing his left hand more, particularly to the body, Morales will start slowing up. Consequently, Morales will be on the receiving end of some heavier shots, like heavy left hooks and right hands. With Morales fading, and way behind on the scorecards, the ring official will be keeping a close eye on the action. Morales' tremendous resolve should see him mount one last surge late in the fight, but because of Garcia's earlier work, it will likely be too little and too late for Erik Morales.

Comment on this article

deepwater says:

rooting for eric on this one. experience vs youth.lets see

ultimoshogun says:

As a huge Morales fan, this breakdown didn't leave me very optimistic. On paper the matchup reminded me of Terry Norris vs Ray Leanard and worried Morales might suffer the same kinda beatdown...However, after reading another scouting report i'm much more optimistic and inclined to believe that maybe we're in for another amazing performance from Morales. The knock on Garcia, as this breakdown points out is his tendancy to throw wide punches. I believe Morales, the technician that he is will be intercepting alot of those wide punches with some of his own and sting Garcia a few times through out the fight. And maybe...just maybe Morales will pull off an upset.