Written by Bernard Fernandez
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HOUSTON – There is a fine line that separates understandable caution from foolish risk-taking, and fighters who appear well on their way to winning a bout sometimes find themselves straddling it.

Is that living legend in the other corner, the crafty veteran who appears to be in deep trouble,

really as hurt as he seems? Or is he just playing possum, hoping to lure a reckless opponent into the danger zone?

In the ring, where data has to be processed in a fraction of a second and strategies accordingly selected, hesitation is almost always the worst way to go. But taking a blind leap of faith and choosing an unwise course of action can be just as hazardous to one's health and chances for victory.

Saturday night here in Reliant Arena, a familiar rite of passage was observed when young, strong, quick Danny "Swift" Garcia, 24, took the WBC super lightweight championship from old, slow and weakened Erik Morales, 35. The scores were 118-109, 117-110 and 116-112.

Well … technically the title was no longer Morales' to defend, the Mexican icon having relinquished it on the scale the day before when he came in 2 pounds over the super lightweight limit of 140. Morales did not even attempt to use his hour's grace period to sweat off those 32 excessive ounces, an apparent admission that his body had given all it had to give and could give no more.

Given Morales' recent failure to approach the splendiferous form he had so frequently exhibited prior to his taking 31 months off from the ring (he is now 3-2 on the comeback trail), the smart money was on Swift to blow the remnants of the legacy of "El Terrible" to smithereens. And, to read the respective scorecards submitted by judges Samuel Conde, Oren Shellenberger and Mark Green, that's exactly what happened.

Or maybe it wasn't. No, this was not your standard-issue, Texas-sized boxing controversy – that more appropriately applied to the other HBO-televised bout on this night, in which a seemingly outclassed James Kirkland was presented with a gift-wrapped disqualification victory over Carlos Molina by referee Jon Schorle and the Texas commission. Still, you have to wonder if the main event might have turned out at least somewhat differently if certain realities been slightly altered.

"I'm not sad. I'm happy," Morales (52-8, 36 KOs) said of his own performance, which might not have recalled his glory days but probably was better than many expected. "I fought with dignity, with pride.

“It wasn’t like he was beating me by a lot. It was pretty competitive.”

Garcia (23-0 14 KOs) also was pleased with what he had shown because, well, it was a victory and a world-title-winning one at that. Hard to complain when you’ve only just turned 24 years of age and have joined the world championship club.

“I’m still kind of in a daze right now,” Garcia said when asked if he felt, well, different since his status had changed. “I can’t believe I’m the world champion. I just went 12 rounds with a legend.”

Morales-Garcia had been on hold since January, when the original date for the fight was postponed when Morales underwent gallbladder surgery in December.

Although Morales had annexed his fourth world title in separate weight classes when he outpointed 22-year-old Mexican Pablo Cesar Cano on Sept. 17. It was not nearly the best Morales ever has looked in the ring. But then he didn’t need to be in top form against someone whose skill-set didn’t approach that of Garcia’s.

“I respect everyone I fight, and I respect Morales,” Garcia, a Phiadelphian of Puerto Rican descent, noted. “But I have to think he’s looking at me like he looked at that kid he just beat. (Cano) was young and undefeated, like me. But I’m not him. I’m better than he is.”

And so it was apparent almost from the opening bell in the Reliant Center. A possibly drained, used-up Morales couldn’t match Garcia’s youth and energy, and with each passing round the younger man added to his point total. The cleaner, harder shots all seemingly were landed by Garcia, and an especially telling one, an overhand right that landed flush, came in the third round when Morales was sent reeling backward.

But Morales, or the memory of him as the future Hall of Famer who had gone to war and given as good as he received against the storied likes of Manny Pacquiao, Marco Antonio Barrera and

Daniel Zaragoza, seemed to keep Garcia from just turning it loose. It was as if he believed Morales was laying a trap for another overconfident kid to stumble into.

Might Garcia have gone for the putaway then? Or in the sixth round, when he pinned Morales against the ropes and was whaling away with both hands? And if not then, what about the 11th round, when Garcia, bleeding from the nose, floored Morales with a left hook flush on the jaw?

“I tried to finish him (in the 11th), but he’s a veteran,” Garcia explained. “He was rolling his shoulders, making me miss. I didn’t want to get … what’s the word? … too greedy. He’s been in big fights before, and he knows how to get in people’s heads.”

It is hardly unusual for a young fighter like Garcia to possibly give too much respect to a living legend like Morales, but Golden Boy president Oscar De La Hoya has been in both positions – rising superstar and faded icon, striving to hang on – and he was quick to realize that Garcia’s performance might be described as the glass being half-full.

“He won the fight and obviously is going to grow from the experience,” De La Hoya said of Garcia. “We’re looking forward to matching him up with other champions so he can unify the titles.”

But yet …

“I went into Danny’s locker room and I was criticizing him left and right,” De La Hoya continued. “I told him, `OK, you went up against a legend, and you beat a legend. That’s great. But you have to put your punches together. It was like every time you hit Erik, you stopped to pose for a picture. You can’t do that.’”

De La Hoya paused, as if he thought too much constructive criticism might detract from Garcia’s opportunity to enjoy the moment before going back to work to improve upon it.

“Danny can learn from this,” the Golden Boy himself said. “There were a lot of good things Danny did, but he also showed a lot of flaws.”

CompuBox statistics appeared to support the decision of the judges. Regardless of whether he failed to put his punches together to his promoter’s satisfaction, Garcia landed 238 of 779, 31 percent, to just 164 of 547, or 30 percent, for Morales. The gap was especially evident in power punches, where Garcia found the range on 170 of 445, 38 percent, to 71 of 240, 30 percent, for Morales.

But Morales’ jab was sharper and more effective as he landed 93 of 307 to 68 of 334 for Garcia, and it was the jab that bloodied Garcia’s nose and opened a cut over his right eye in the 11th round.

Morales, who earned $1 million, minus the $50,000 penalty he was assessed for failing to make weight, said he was considering retirement, but would probably hold off on making that decision until he had a chance to schedule a possible farewell bout in Mexico, where his popularity remains unabated.

“I don’t want to keep fighting to lose,” he said. “If I’m going to keep fighting, I want to win. But I have to evaluate if I want to keep doing this.”

Garcia, whose purse was $225,000, figures he’s due for a lengthy residence in or near boxing’s ritziest neighborhood, and he’ll take what he learned against Morales and apply that knowledge to future fights.

“Get used to this face,” Garcia said at the postfight press conference. “I’m going to be around for a long time.”

In the co-featured bout, Kirkland (31-1, 27 KOs), the knockout artist from Austin, Texas, was having all sorts of problems with the flurry-and-grab tactics employed by Chicago’s Carlos Molina (19-5-2, 6 KOs), who built a substantial lead through nine rounds of the scheduled 12-rounder. But Kirkand knocked down Molina in the closing seconds of Round 10, setting into

motion a bizarre chain of events.

Schorle was giving a count to Molina, who did not appear to be discombobulated at all, when the bell sounded and Molina's corner team entered the ring. Schorle then disqualified Molina, a draconian response for an infraction that was literally a heartbeat from being no infration at all.

Kirkland, who retained his WBC Continental Americas super welterweight title, maintained that he was just finding his rhythm and that Molina would never have survived two more rounds of what he was about to dish out. Molina, who was 11-0-1 in his previous 12 outings, disputed that. The shame of it is that neither one was afforded the opportunity to state his case over those two unfought rounds.

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riverside says:

Congrats to Danny Garcia, But a prime Teribble Morales would taken him out same way he took out Junior jones, Morales had Danny hurt, when he got careless and caught with the hook that dropped him! Not to impress with Danny Garcia, Very little head movement, Id like to see Rios vs Danny Garcia in the future. As for Molina, Seems like he get the shaft time after time.

Matthew says:

Once again, more chaos ensues with officials in Texas. Based on the letter of the law, Schorle was probably correct in issuing a disqualification, but why didn't it occur as soon as Molina's cornerman entered the ring? Why did he have to consult someone at ringside before issuing his decision? Unless he was going to do it immediately, he probably shouldn't have done it at all. And why is Gale Van Hoy still allowed to judge high-profile fights? His scorecard was a disgrace, just like it was for Maglinaggi-Diaz I. At least Laurence Cole didn't royally screw up, for once.

deepwater says:

garcia is over rated. morales made it an even fight up until the 9th. garcia is nothing special. who was the midget with the diamond nonsense? someone should a ripped his chain off!

deepwater says:

ban boxing in tex ***. nothing good ever comes out of boxing in texas. keep it football only.