The heart of the sport can be seen, immense and healthy, at shows like the one Joe Rein reported on back in 2003.

"Reports of my death are grossly exaggerated," Mark Twain said... The same's true of boxing, if you'd seen the army straining to get into the Grand Olympic Auditorium in L.A. for Oscar de La Hoya's "Boxeo de Oro."

It was only 5 P.M. on a workday and ticket holders were in a ragged line stretching well around Grand Ave. -- looked like the Oklahoma land rush just before the gun went off.

These were largely roll-up-your-sleeves guys, from what I could tell, Latino. They'd earned their faces and were in good spirits -- with maybe a head start on a drink or two. They knew the niceties of the game, but they came to see guys fight, to see someone bite down and show "Corazon." Heart....Somebody they could identify with... root for.

When the floodgates opened, the mob poured in, sweeping aside the ticket takers.

It was impossible being jostled along in those narrow, sweating corridors, not to have the hairs on the back of my neck stand up, imagining Enrique Bolonas, Jose Becerra, Ruben Olivares, Mando Ramos and Bobby Chacon battling in this very ring, defining Aztec warrior and the legacy of the Olympic.

Management gave it a new paint job, new seats, but this is the gladiator pit that dates back to the ‘30s...where Al Jolson and "Bugsy" Seigel arrived by limo to sit just a few feet from me to watch "The Brown Bomber" and Henry Armstrong. The reverence was palpable.

Not a bad sight line in the place.

The arena was filling quickly, electricity charging the air and bringing the legends to life.

On the main floor behind the 15-20 rows of ringside seats was a portable bar. "All American beer! No Mexican beer!” shouted the bartender. A curious marketing ploy, considering. It didn't seem to hurt sales; a quick look around confirmed.

It was one large extended family: A reunion of stand-up guys. The badges of the trade marking

every beaming face -- balcony to ringside. Much backslapping, ribbing, dirty laughter, intros, and lots and lots of beer all ‘round.

They yelled, stamped their feet and pounded the air when the action heated in the ring. A Godzilla-sized promotional bottle of Miller Lite, with a poor soul inside, was being led blind through their midst by a guy with a rope...and threatened to tip over at every step, much to the delight of all.

The only things missing from the "old school" picture were: The smell of cigars and the cloud of smoke that made it all look like film-noir.

The early KO's by the super middleweight Andrade brothers had everybody toasting and the beer flowing.

Librado Andrade, in a ring overrun by press, was bursting with pride accepting the first Miller Lite Golden State Award for the outstanding performance of the evening, for his emphatic KO of Errol Banner.

Watching Andrade clutch that sculpture, being turned in every direction for pictures and interviews, and standing on the bottom strand of the ropes trying to stretch to the balcony to share his excitement with friends from La Habre, it was easy to see, he was going to have no trouble dedicating himself to winning a world title.

Security was having no luck trying to clear revelers out of the aisles. No sooner did a group reluctantly disperse than they re-assembled larger and louder.

Raven-haired Pamela Anderson wannabes with painted-on jeans and as much cleavage as they could engineer trolled ringside endlessly in hopes of catching the eye of some mover-n'-shaker for a taste of the "good life". The hotties acted offended at the whistles and street remarks, but never failed to retrace their routes.

Some ringsiders slipped their tickets to buddies who scampered down from the cheap seats to claim them over the mezzanine wall when a guard wasn't looking. And then, like cats with cream on their whiskers, nonchalantly flashed the ducats at security and disappeared among the heavy hitters, like children let loose in a candy factory.

The fans got an extra glimpse of skin in the prelims prior to the televised fights. The round-card girls jiggled and waved and threw kisses in Band-Aids and floss that lost the struggle to contain the Jell-O inside. The building rocked in appreciation of the generous scoops of dessert served up on stiletto heels.

The PG-rated TV bouts had the same girls in gym shorts and halters, looking more like an aerobics class. Their more-modest garb drew a collective groan. Spice is what they wanted, not health food.

Fernando Vargas, not the least surly or ill-at-ease at a Golden Boy promotion, lounged at the ring apron in tinted shades and an open silken shirt, basking in adulation all around him.

A hulking figure--standing just off to the side of Vargas-- in an oversize football jersey--arms locked across his chest, expressionless, with menacing dark glasses, clocking anything to do with Vargas--was the lone reminder of his recent headlines.

Watching two of Vargas's homies shuttle the adoring to and from him between rounds was damn impressive; it had all the precision of a military operation. One mother gingerly handed Vargas her baby. He cradled it and smiled, while she snapped a picture that might inspire a future ring career.

It looked like the line to sit on Santa's lap at X-Mas in a department store.

Two strikingly beautiful women swathed in Calvin Klein and Armani stole away from their escorts and flirtatiously snuggled-in for a picture with Vargas, who grinned and encircled them with his arms. It was good to be the king.

A smarmy guy in a Hawaiian shirt over a paunch and shoe black on his hair was pressing the flesh of anybody-and-all a few rows from Vargas, showing his barely-teenage stable of fighters in the $250 seats what it would be like when they hit it big. With their Marine haircuts and wide eyes, the young fighters looked like goslings plunked down from another planet.

A Nell Carter look-alike, in a scarlet lamp-shade-of-a-dress and lots of 'tude, invaded a row of celebs and got each one up to pose with her for a picture, handing the camera to whoever was closest. And if the flash didn't go off, she insisted on another. Then she passed around a boxing glove to be signed, instructing each what to write. She just waved off any objection. With her in my corner, I could get a title shot.

When Julio Gonzalez and "Panchito" Bojado were spotted, they both were unfailingly gracious--and genuinely touched--under the onslaught of fans for handshakes, pictures with them, a word or two, or a signed program or a blouse front. Some nearly fell out of the stands just for a touch as they went by.

Bojado circulated all around the arena, always in the center of bodies clawing at him; his posse trying to screen him, as best they could. Eventually, he stood right below me; he looked no more than 16. Like bees to honey, everybody descended on Bojado, climbing over each other and the wall to get to him.

When I asked the guys in front to sit down, I couldn't see, Bojado poked his head through the jam: "I'm terribly sorry for the interruption. I apologize," and he drew the mob away, like the Pied Piper. Pretty classy. He made a fan out of me.

Just to the left of my aisle seat, a guy looking like he was doing a bad-drunk imitation swayed precariously at the top of the stairs, with beer sloshing out of his cup, about 10 feet above the concrete floor. In what seemed like slow motion, he lost his hold on the railing. I just managed to grab his wrist before he fell, and some others pitched in immediately to pull him back. The drunk's friends were all over me with 'Thanks' in rapid-fire Spanish; their beers punctuated every word. I was sure I was in for a shower.

Bobby Chacon wove his way through the crowd, shaking hands, just a hint unsteady on his pins--oddly small, considering what a giant he was in the ring--with that same signature grin plastered on every sports page when he roared off the streets of Compton to shake the Olympic to the rafters and insure his place in the hearts of these fans. He should have been saluted at center ring; he left so much of himself there.

A fellow in his 20s, next to me, tapped my arm and pointed to Chacon, with the respect reserved for an idol, and went on in Spanish about him. His tone said it all. The guy behind me leaned in, expressing the same sentiments, and offered me some tortilla chips.

The heir apparent to Chacon may be "Mighty" Mike Anchondo; nearly the same size as Chacon, with the same schoolboy good looks, masking a killer instinct and a flare for the dramatic.

Anchondo fought the semi wind-up 10 rounder against Nicaraguan Roque "Rocky" Cassiani (23-4-1), who looked like a mini Marvin Hagler when he doffed his brocaded robe. The similarity ended with the muscles.

Anchondo has 21 fights and 17 KOs, is not tall for a 130-pounder, but he has the mark of a veteran: totally relaxed in the ring; his combinations so fluid they belie the speed and power; and almost on cue, he responds to the urging of the crowd with the kind of vicious salvos that seem over-the-top in a movie.

After some confusion at the end of the 9th round, where it looked like referee James Jen-Kin stepped in to stop it-- with Anchondo raining unanswered blows on a helpless Cassiani sagging against the ropes--the ref, inexplicably, allowed it to continue.

It was bedlam before the 10th round. The crowd smelled blood and tore the roof off. They were on their feet, chanting "Mighty Mike! Mighty Mike!" ...Anchondo didn't disappoint. At the bell, he attacked and kept firing until the ref called a halt. Then, in unbounded joy, he leaped into the arms of his handlers, who held him aloft while he punched the sky repeatedly, and the building shook.

Cassiani was made to order for Anchondo, with his relentless, one-dimensional, search-n'-destroy mind-set. Cassiani threw with bad intentions, and pressed and pressed, and took it, and took it, and took it...until the ref decided he should take no more. He went out on his shield.

After the Anchondo fight, while the ref was standing against the ropes congratulating Anchondo, a woman producer for HBO shoved the ref aside, yelled something in his face, and yanked Anchondo --literally-- across the ring to the color commentator, barking orders to clear the way, and glaring. Roberto Duran couldn't have been more menacing.

Anchondo came back out after changing. He was greeted with the adulation one sees only at the Plaza De Toros after a brave kill.

"Mighty Mike! Mighty Mike!" It was deafening. Anchondo signed and flung gloves with all the strength he could muster to the top of the balcony. The place was in a frenzy. Had some fans not been caught by the ankles at the last moment, they'd have sailed off the balcony diving for a glove.

Some months ago, I was impressed with Anchondo's sparring at the Wild Card Gym, and wanted to interview him, so I looked for an interpreter, without any luck. I approached Anchondo, with some hesitation: "DO...YOU...SPEAK...ANY...ENGLISH? I...DON'T...SPEAK...ANY SPANISH."

"I don't either," he said, laughing. "It happens to me all the time."

He's a very engaging, open-faced, unlikely looking executioner, who connects with the barrio, like Art Aragon used to. Plus, the personality to make him a media favorite. It's about time they start beating the drum for him. He could headline the card and pack the place.

The main-go was won convincingly by Jose Navarro over Jorge Luis "Speedy" Gonzalez, for the IBA Continental Americas junior bantamweight title. Navarro is not what you think of when the image of a Mexican fighter comes to mind: Chango Carmona or "Bazooka" Limon.

Navarro is a well-balanced, unflappable ring technician, who fires from the port side like a surgeon. He keeps sticking broomsticks in your face, and threads the needle up and down--stinging, stinging, stinging, keeping pressure at the end of his long arms. He's an educated boxer, and though he doesn't fire the blood, it's going to take a special fighter to take him out of his game.

Gonzalez was outclassed, but he kept throwing bricks and finally his body, in wave after kamikaze wave against the Gatling gun that was strafing him. Freddie Roach, Gonzalez's trainer, must have told him before the last round: 'Son, you need a knockout!'

At the bell, Gonzalez bolted out at full gallop, flailing and swinging, trying to will himself past those whirring blades to land the one shot that would turn the tide. Gonzalez fell short, but he gave it all of his heart and won the heart of the crowd doing it.

Most walkout bouts are just that. People can't get to their cars fast enough, but quite a few stayed and were treated to a very spirited six-round junior featherweight go that Kahren Harutyunyan won by a split decision over Marinho Gonzalez.

It's not a given that a taller man will out jab a shorter one. Harutyunyan proved that. He looked like he was going to need a ladder to reach Gonzalez, but he always got there first...and often. Though Harutyunyan was the only non-Latino on the card, what few that remained didn't begrudge him his props.

Harutyunyan has been a hard luck fighter, and far better than his record indicates (9-1-3). When he got the nod, most of the Armenian community of Glendale jumped into the ring and danced and embraced him. When he came down the ring steps with a grin as big as he was, the Wild Card regulars showed him how they treated their own.

Spilling out into the downtown night with fathers and sons still animatedly buzzing about the fights in Spanish, my step quickened with the pride of inclusion in this fraternity that spans generations and language. It was no different than the old Garden or St. Nick's; and though boxing is relegated to the back page of the sports section, this invalid still has a lotta life in it. It's

all about "Corazon."

Comment on this article

Radam G says:

NICE! Kasing-kasing certainty, no doubt. And it will always be about "Corazon." Just ask the Tin Man. Holla!

SouthPaul says:

Bobby Chacon.. Good mention...one of the most tragic scenes Ive saw as a fan was seeing Bobby outside the Staples Center straight looking like a half crazed homeless man. It was during a press conference for Mosley vs De La Hoya 1. Punch drunk like the Kool Aid man. Sad indeed. Good year of attending the fights though. Morales vs Barrera 1, De la Hoya vs Mosely 1 then closing the year with Trinidad vs Vargas. All great fights but without question ... Forces Of Destruction (feroz vs tito) best of the bunch.. Still remains best live event I've ever attended.

GANZ says:

RI9-5171 called that number a million times, I think Im gonna cry

ArneK. says:

Wow! A classic indeed. If this piece isn't anthologized, it ought to be, and I'll be the first to buy the book.