

From Manuel Ortiz To Carlos Zarate, Bantamweights Can Bang

Written by David A. Avila

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They're little and often overlooked but history has shown that 118-pound bantamweights pack more excitement pound for pound than a room full of heavyweights.

Beginning with Fernando Montiel's defense of the WBO and WBC bantamweight titles against Nonito "Filipino Flash" Montiel on Saturday and ending in two months when Abner Mares fights Joseph "King Kong" Agbeko for the IBF version, the boxing world gets a full look at how mighty bantamweights truly are.

If you're new to the bantamweight division you might think having this many good bantamweights is an aberration. Not at all.

Back in the 1970s bantamweights like Carlos Zarate, Alfonso Zamora, Lupe Pintor, Alberto Davila and tons of others were selling out arenas from Mexico City to Los Angeles on a regular basis.

One primary reason was their explosiveness. When the "Zzz Boys" (a nickname tabbed on Zarate and Zamora by the now extinct Los Angeles Herald-Examiner) fought in the late 1970s at the Inglewood Forum, there was not a seat empty.

Zarate (45-0, 44 KOs) entered the ring with Zamora (29-0, 29 KOs) in 1977, both fighters had tabbed a combined 73 knockouts in 74 pro fights. Ironically, their showdown took place on April 23, the same date as the coming bantamweight tournament finale between Mares and Agbeko, and Vic Darchinyan and Yonhhy Perez at the Nokia Theater in L.A.

It was an explosive atmosphere that literally had explosions from people lighting cherry bombs in the audience. Can you imagine that happening today? Homeland Security would empty out the arena.

Right during the middle of the fight a guy in a wrestler's mask jumped in the ring challenging all comers. He was taken down by a number of L.A.P.D officers in riot gear who were in no mood to be kind. The fight resumed and fans were equally divided on who would win. That April 23, both bantamweights expected to win and had the notches to prove it. But it was the taller and more technical Zarate that found an opening and floored Zamora three times in the fourth round before that fighter's trainer/father threw in the towel that ironically landed on his son's face. Then Mr. Zamora went after Zarate's trainer Cuyo Hernandez and both began throwing blows.

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They don't have fights like that any more.

"Man, those firecrackers scared everyone," said Alfredo Perez, who attended the fight with his father. "Then that wrestler and the way the fight ended. It was a crazy atmosphere. I'll never forget it."

Years earlier the Inglewood Forum was the site for other bantamweight struggles including many of Ruben Olivares. Battles against Takao Sakurai, Lionel Rose, Alan Rudkin, Kazuyoshi Kanazawa, Jesus Pimental, Rafael Herrera, and several against Chucho Castillo between 1969 and 1972 put the bantamweights on the map. It also shot interest in Mexican fighters too.

"Those were the days," said Johnny Ortiz, a former boxing trainer, manager and boxing radio host. "Ruben Olivares was one of the best boxers to ever come out of Mexico. He could box and he could hit."

In the late 1930s through the 1950s another bantamweight dominated the world. His name was Manuel Ortiz, who was born in Corona, California, a small suburb near Riverside, California. Until Orlando Canizales arrived, it was Ortiz who held the record for bantamweight title defenses. He often fought at the Olympic Auditorium and captured the bantamweight world title in 1942 and kept it until 1947 a total of 14 title defenses before losing to Harold Dade. Then he won it back and won four more title defenses before losing to Vic Toweel in 1950. It was bantamweight domination when there was only one world title in the world.

"Manuel Ortiz was the kind of fighter who would only fight as hard as he needed to fight. Sometimes he looked not so good. When he fought good guys he was unbeatable," said Leonard Castillon, 95, who saw many of Ortiz's battles at the Olympic and the Hollywood Legion Stadium. "He hit real hard and was a great boxer."

Ortiz was the first of the great bantamweights from this country who brought recognition to the division. Now, 60 years later, another group of 118-pound dynamos have arrived ready to explode on the boxing scene like their predecessors.

Who will be the one to emerge as the best?

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Radam G says:

That photo tells it all. Some of the most thrilling bouts in boxing history were held at the grand old Olympic Auditorium. For all of us pugilists who got down there, our ghosts will be hanging out there one day with those who have already crossed over. Holla!