Written by Ron Borges
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*Feb. 18, 2011, Las Vegas, Nevada --- Two-time world champion Nonito "The Filipino Flash" Donaire (L) and WBC/WBO Bantamweight champion Fernando Montiel weigh in (both fighters were 118 lb) for their upcoming world title fight to be held at the Mandalay Bay Events Center in Las Vegas on Saturday, February 19, live on HBO Boxing After Dark. Top Rank promotes this event in association with Zanfer Promotions. --- Photo Credit : Chris Farina - Top Rank*It is often difficult to be sure who a world champion should fight next but in the case of Nonito Donaire and Fernando Montiel the answer is obvious. What is not is how to make the obvious happen.

Montiel is risking the unified (WBO and WBA) bantamweight championship he holds against the younger and possibly more powerful Donaire tomorrow night on HBO in what should be the kind of classic little big men showdown that once made Erik Morales, Marco Antonio Barrera and Manny Pacquiao fierce rivals. It is a rare thing lovers of the sweet science are being handed – a sweet matchup and a fight fan's fight.

Montiel is the craftier and more experienced fighter; Donaire the stronger and more aggressive. That sets up a classic contrast in styles that will, hopefully, showcase both the skills and the entertainment value the little big men so often bring to the ring.

While each has already claimed the winner should be considered the best bantamweight in the world, they have also conceded in almost the same breath that that issue cannot be fully settled between them alone.
That's because two months later, in the final of SHOWTIME'S two-fight bantamweight tournament, IBF champion Joseph Agbeko defends his portion of the 118-pound title against undefeated Abner Mares (21-0-1, 13 KO), a confrontation they arrived at by first defeating Yhonny Perez and Vic Darchinyan, respectively. Whoever emerges from that as the SHOWTIME (and IBF) champion will have walked a hard road to glory and would be as deserving of being called the best bantamweight in the world as the Donaire-Montiel victor.

Yet Agbeko and Perez also concede the issue of who rules the 118-pound division cannot be settled until the winners of these two matches meet. Logic, common sense and the demands of honest competition all cry out for it, as should any real fan of boxing. The essence of the sport is to find out who is the better man. The essence of a champion is to have proven that point against all comers in the only place that counts in boxing – inside the ropes.

Yet that is where we run headlong into what makes this sport so frustrating. The fighters all agree the issue needs to be settled in the ring and are agreeable to doing so. Their managers say the same, although you never really know with those guys.

So the only thing that could hold up a fall ultimate unification fight at 118 pounds is the fierce and often illogical rivalry between promoters Bob Arum and Oscar De La Hoya.

Even Arum admitted recently that the winners are logical opponents yet such is the wall between his company and De La Hoya's that the two sides scheduled dueling press conferences (one by phone the other live in L.A.) at roughly the same time to celebrate and publicize their two shows.

No other sport operates like this, which is why most other sports are on healthier ground than boxing. Why can't grown men act like it? Why can't they do business in a business-like fashion without so often acting like rival teenage gang leaders rather than what they are, which is guardians of the game by virtue of the choke-hold they have on the sport at the moment? Probably the best thing that could happen for boxing is that Agbeko, who for the moment at least is represented by Don King, defeats Mares. That's no knock on Mares, who is undefeated for a reason and proved his mettle by getting up off the floor to defeat Darchinyan and win a shot at Agbeko with blood on his face and a buzzing noise between his ears.

Rather it is merely a reflection of how the business of boxing has been so turned on its ear that it is easier today for Arum to make a deal with his long-time rival King than with his former fighter, De La Hoya. Since Arum promotes both Donaire and Montiel (sounds like King circa 1980 doesn't it?) the easiest way to crown one true bantamweight champion would be for Agbeko to back up his words.

"I'm only thinking about Mares now but I know I'm going to defeat him and look for the winner of Donaire and Mares,'' Agbeko said.

Mares, speaking at the opposite end of the Nokia Theatre in L.A. at the time, echoed the same sentiment when he admitted, "I know I should focus on Agbeko. It's a tough fight. But I'd like the winner of Montiel and Donaire. That's the fight the people are asking for – to go against the winner of that fight."

If Donaire prevails he will have beaten in back-to-back fights former WBA champion Wladimir Sydorenko and unified champion Montiel, an impressive debut in the bantamweight division.

"After Montiel I will have two belts with one more to go to accomplish the dream I have wanted since I was a young boy,'' Donaire (25-1-, 17 KO) said. "I could be the first undisputed world champion from Asia.''

There's only one way to do that and Arum did not sound all that interested in pursuing it because, well, he has control of other fighters he could make just as much money with fighting Donaire while having the comfort of being the promoter of both sides of the equation.

“To stay at bantamweight and fight the winner of Mares and Agbeko or off to 122, where we have two 122-pound champions (Steve Molitor and Miguel Vazquez),’’ Arum said when asked about Donaire’s future prospects.

“And he’s going to keep moving up in weight. We have killer featherweights. We have fighters for him to fight to make exceptional fights all the way up through 135 pounds.’’

In other words, who needs to know who the best bantamweight in the world is if it means doing business with De La Hoya?

If Montiel has his hand raised he would have beaten long-time WBC champion Hozumi Hasegawa and a rising star in Donaire with the only real bantamweight obstacle left to overcome an obvious one. Yet he faces the same problem Donaire has if Mares prevails against Agbeko - Arum is his promoter, too.

“I do want these kind of (big) fights,’’ Montiel (43-2-2, 33 KO) said. “I do want to be known and I do want to be the best.’’

To do that, Montiel conceded, you have to fight the best. He would argue that’s him if he defeats Donaire but he understands you can’t shadow box your way to greatness. The Agbeko-Mares winner would have just as legitimate an argument to make and so a fight between the winners would be an exclamation point on the bantamweight division, a moment in time in which no one would be unsure any longer who rules the 118-pound division.

Unless, of course, that turns out to be Bob Arum and Oscar De La Hoya and not the fighters after all.

Comment on this article

Radam G says:

I'm pullin' for da Filipino Flash. But I'm kind of worry too. He has had too much of a challenge of making weight. And if it is true, that he had to come always the down from 150lbs, he is in deep kimche. Ballooning then draining is a BIG NO, NO! Obesity and then starvation in boxing is for those who will be tomato cans sooner before later. [Just holla at Ricky Hatton.] Nonito Donairey really needs to get it together. Or he will be in a long line of boxer who missed greatness because of not knowing how to control food and not knowing how to get your personal life together. There is a tyme to be very selfish, and the tyme for luvin.' Selishness and separation is not the same. Love Thy Father! Love Thy Mother! This is VERY Filipino. One will not be in this world without their DNA. Holla!

Big Daddy says:

Although I mostly agree with Mr. Borges about the TR-GBP Feud being bad for Boxing. Alil

Drama and Bad Blood is the perfect spice for Boxing.. as long as it does'nt gum up the works. Abner vs. Nonito= GBP vs. TR.. Mex vs. Fil.. Nor-Cal vs. So-Cal.. and BobFather vs. Oscar... Bring It!!!! As for Nonito being overtrained for the Big Fight Tonite.. He's been training under the expert eye of a now legit Victor Conte. There's articles on other websites detailing their relationship and how beneficial (But NOT illegally) he's been to Nonito maximizing his training.