Written by Eric Raskin
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They say those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it. In the case of Giovanni Segura vs. Ivan Calderon II this Saturday night, we should only be so lucky.

You see, history can repeat itself in one of two ways, and either one would be a blessing. The obvious repetition would be if this fight looks like Segura-Calderon I, which was named Fight of the Year by The Ring in 2010 and packed plenty of action and drama (as Fights of the Year tend to).

The less obvious repetition would be if this fight looks like Willie Pep vs. Sandy Saddler II, which was named Fight of the Year by The Ring in 1949 and packed plenty of action and drama

(again, go figure). The potential comparisons between the two fights are many, and if “Iron Boy” has as much Pep in him as his supporters have long argued, then maybe history made 62 years ago will repeat itself.

Even though Calderon is a southpaw and Pep was not, the stylistic similarities run deep. They’re slick defensive specialists with minimal pop in their mitts. Pep is considered one of the very greatest pure boxers of all-time because he defeated so many top fighters without the luxury of being able to hurt them. Calderon is one of the greatest pure boxers of his day (as the poor man’s Pep, he doesn’t get any “all-time” designation), also carving out a place among boxing’s elite despite shooting blanks.

But both eventually came up against younger, taller, vicious hitting foes and lost their crowns by upset knockouts. In October 1948, Saddler stopped Pep in the fourth round to claim the featherweight championship, handing him only his second defeat in 136 fights. Calderon was unbeaten in 35 bouts when a poor man’s Saddler, the all-offense Segura, convinced him to stay down on one knee last August.

Now Calderon is off the knee and trying to rise all the way back up by reversing the defeat. But it won’t be easy, as Pep would tell him if “The Will O’ The Wisp” was still alive.

To even the score against Saddler required “one of boxing’s greatest displays of will and courage,” as co-authors Steve Farhood and Stanley Weston wrote in The Ring: Boxing In The 20th Century. They called it “a wondrous performance.” All of Pep’s skill was on display as he took seven of the first eight rounds with his legs, with his quick fists, with his ability to clinch and spin and do everything necessary to avoid significant contact from Saddler’s heavy hands.

But Saddler roared back, hurting Pep in the ninth and nearly forcing a stoppage in the 10th. From there, it was a question of how badly did Pep want it and how gutsy could he be. Pretty gutsy, as it turned out. He won probably two of the last five rounds, and though he was barely hanging on at the end and would need stitches in four different places on his face, his early dominance earned him a unanimous decision.

Saddler said afterward, “I don’t think he’ll fight me again.” He was wrong; Pep fought him twice more. What Sandy should have said was, “I don’t think he’ll beat me again.” Saddler won both their third and fourth meetings, proving his style was all wrong for a Pep who was beginning to show signs of wear and tear. The third and fourth fights underlined what a remarkable achievement it was and what a near-perfect performance it required for Pep to beat Saddler even once.

That’s precisely the challenge that Calderon now faces. He’s 36 years old, his legs deprived of some of the bounce they once had. Segura is an animal, in his prime at 28, as technically flawed as Calderon is technically perfect, but able to make up for it with sheer ferocity and youthful energy. Calderon can’t hurt Segura. Segura knows that Calderon can’t hurt him. Calderon knows that Segura knows that he can’t hurt him. The Puerto Rican has to box brilliantly, put more than six rounds in the bank, and somehow survive 36 minutes of Segura’s fury.

As expected, excuses for Calderon’s defeat last August have crept into his prefight interviews.

“I didn’t train right for our first fight,” he said. “My leg muscles were injured. I couldn’t run and training days were suspended in the gym. I usually spar 100 rounds, but all I had was 45 for the last fight. No excuses, he did the job, but that wasn’t the Ivan everybody knows. I need to be able to move my legs to control the fight.”

Many assumed at the time that Iron Boy made a flawed strategic decision because he wanted to give his hometown crowd in Guaynabo their money’s worth. Now he’s asking us to consider that injured legs, not a desire to entertain, were at fault. But either way, there’s something to be said for Segura’s style preventing Calderon from controlling the fight with his own style. It’s part of boxing’s timeless chicken-and-the-egg debate: Did Calderon fight the wrong fight as a conscious decision? Or did he fight the wrong fight because Segura forced him to?

In the seven months since, Calderon has celebrated another birthday while junior flyweight champ Segura has surely experienced the uptick in confidence that comes with beating the man considered to be the best in your division. In theory, the second fight should look a lot like the first—and if anything, it should be more one-sided in the Mexican’s favor.

If Calderon is to win, he’ll have to be a poor man’s Pep who is poorer by no more than a few dollars. A broke man’s Pep can’t pull this off.

Calderon will need to be perfect, as Pep was for the first half of the Saddler rematch. He’ll need to show tremendous heart, as Pep did in the second half.

And then he’ll need to pray that all of that is actually enough to win, as it just barely was for Pep.

Eric Raskin can be contacted at RaskinBoxing@yahoo.com. You can follow him on Twitter @EricRaskin and listen to new episodes of his podcast, Ring Theory, at http://ringtheory.podbean.com .

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Radam G says:

"Iron Boy" should change that nickname. For boxing, he is now a grandpa. Maybe "Iron Pawpaw" would be more matching of him with a long-in-the-tooth stance nowadays. Holla!