

THE BEST OF BOXING'S BEST DIVISION

What We Should Expect From The Five Top Welterweights Stars

By William Dettloff

Welterweights are irresistible. Fast like the lightweights and featherweights, but strong and more likely to knock a man into next week if they catch him right. There's a reason two of the greatest prizefighters ever, Sugar Ray Robinson and Henry Armstrong, did most of their best work at 147. There must be something about that size, the combination of a certain height and musculature that produces so many good athletes and memorable fighters.

Just as the heavyweight division is generally loathe to spawn higher-quality fighters and memorable series, welterweight is prone to them. Think of the eras: Jimmy McLarnin, Barney Ross, Armstrong, and Fritzie Zivic. Then Robinson, Kid Gavilan, Tony Demarco, and Carmen Basilio. Later, Emile Griffith, Benny "Kid" Paret, and Luis Rodriguez, and after that the era of the great Jose Napoles. Not long after we had Ray Leonard, Thomas

Hearns, Wilfred Benitez, and Roberto Duran, and 10 years later, Oscar De La Hoya, Pernell Whitaker, Felix Trinidad, and Ike Quartey.

Today we find ourselves in yet another very good welterweight era. There are other very interesting weight classes, of course. Junior lightweight, lightweight, and junior welter each is loaded with good fighters, as is junior bantam, and any division headed up by guys like Israel Vazquez and Rafael Marquez, as is junior feather, is worth watching. But welterweight is where the real action is.

Every style is represented. You have the resurgent Shane Mosley, still fast, still fearless, still a fighter through and through, and coming off a huge upset win. You have Miguel Cotto, part bone-crunching slugger, part methodical boxer, back in the win column after losing in one of the great slugfests of last year. There's Antonio Margarito, pressure fighter extraordinaire, whose loss to Mosley and apparent cheating have seriously damaged his reputation and standing, but whose future nevertheless remains at 147 pounds.

A little farther down are the young guns: Joshua Clottey, who gave Margarito fits when they met three years ago, a strong, stubborn puncher, and young Andre Berto, maybe the division's next big star or maybe the new Oba Carr, the young phenom who never could get over the hump and join the big guys at the top.

What follows is what we hope is a comprehensive overview of the welterweight division, provided by analyses of the five fighters listed above. For each we discuss The Good, The Bad, Who We Want Him to Fight Next, Who We Think He'll Fight Next, and Long-Range Prognosis.

Conspicuous by their absence are three of the sport's bigger names: Floyd Mayweather, Manny Pacquiao, and Paul Williams. Mayweather isn't listed because, at this writing at least, he's still officially retired. A comeback seems imminent, but as yet undeclared. He makes it official and then decides to hang around a while, the weight class becomes infinitely better, if you can stand it.

Pacquiao isn't here because his next fight is at junior

welterweight and who knows where he'll go after that? Permanent residence at 147 seems possible but unlikely, despite how potent he was against De La Hoya. Williams probably could still make 147 for the right fight, but has moved on to junior middleweight and might end up a light heavyweight for all we know. He's a wildcard at 147, but not probable enough to be in a big fight to make the analysis.

So what's happening in your favorite division? Let's find out.

SHANE MOSLEY 46-5 (39)

The Good: It's never been better to be "Sugar Shane" than it is right now and we're not talking just about his recent parole, *er*, divorce. The win over Margarito was Mosley's best performance in years and the reason he is right now the hottest 147-pounder in the world.

The Bad: Regardless of how good he looked against Margarito, Mosley remains an old fighter who not long ago struggled with Ricardo Mayorga, of all people, and lost to Cotto. Also, is it possible that Margarito's style, naked

wraps, and the wear from his recent war with Cotto made Mosley look better than he is? Then there's the steroid story that will just not go away (nor should it).

Who We Want Him To Fight Next: The question is who don't we want him to fight next? In a perfect world it would be Floyd Mayweather, who may have officially ended his retirement by the time you read this. Speed against speed. Wonderful.

Who He'll Probably Fight Next: Andre Berto was mentioned prior to the Margarito fight, but Mosley's dazzling performance, coupled with Berto's close call against Luis Collazo, has probably nixed that match for the time being. The winner of the Hatton-Pacquiao fight isn't out of the question, but we're thinking more along the lines of Zab Judah or Carlos Quintana, two top-10 guys Mosley can stay busy against and probably beat while he waits for another big fight—preferably a rematch against Cotto for the vacant RING welterweight championship.

Long-Range Prognosis: The never-ending career of Bernard Hopkins notwithstanding, what kind of long-range prognosis can there be for a 37-year-old fighter? Mosley will win another very big fight, maybe two, then catch a beating (maybe from Paul Williams) that will wrap up his career.

MIGUEL COTTO 33-1 (27)

The Good: Between his demolition of Michael Jennings and the question mark that Margarito's loaded hand wraps has planted next to all of his important recent wins, 2009 got off to a rollicking good start for Cotto. He appeared against Jennings not to have suffered any lingering damage from the loss to Margarito and remains a highly skilled boxer-puncher.

The Bad: Let's face it: Loaded wraps or not, Cotto flat-out submitted to Margarito. Can we blame him? Of course not; he was getting hammered. But now every iron-chinned puncher Cotto faces has something to shoot for. And the truly great fighters never quit.

Who We want Him To Fight Next: Cotto deserves the chance to see if he can beat Margarito when everyone knows Margarito's gloves are clean, and we deserve another great slugfest, so why not? Except for the fact that we'd have to wait for Magarito's suspension to end, this would be the perfect fight for both guys.

Who He'll Probably Fight Next: Cotto will face Clottey, June 13, at Madison Square Garden. Far more qualified and much tougher than Jennings, Clottey is just the kind of iron-chinned puncher that will test Cotto's resolve. Moreover, it's

a good, fan-friendly fight that will probably come close to filling the Garden.

Long-Range Prognosis: Cotto is still young enough at 28 to qualify as being in his prime, and is too skilled and powerful not to keep succeeding at the higher levels of the game, even in this deep division. He'll be the world welterweight champion before he's through, probably within the next year.

ANTONIO MARGARITO 37-6 (27)

The Good: Margarito's gloves, even assuming they've always been loaded, didn't help him walk through Cotto's best hooks or fight Williams almost to a standstill or wade through Kermit Cintron's best right hands. He remains a world-class fighter, doctored wraps or not.

The Bad: Margarito's license was revoked for at least a year by the California commission, which means he won't be fighting in the United States for at least that long. His reputation, even among his Mexican fans, has taken a huge hit. Moreover, you have to wonder if the beating Mosley gave him took anything out of him.

Who We Want Him To Fight Next: The most logical fight for Margarito is a return bout with Cotto. Another win

removes any doubt surrounding the outcome of the first fight, and goes some way toward restoring his credibility. If he can't beat Cotto again, but is competitive in another war, who's to say they can't have a third fight?

Who He'll Probably Fight Next: As we went to press there still was some question around whether Margarito would take a fight in Mexico, a proposition his promoter, Bob Arum, supports. But doing so probably hurts his chances of getting his license back next year. If he fights in Mexico, it will be someone on the level of Carlos Baldomir or maybe a not-ready-for primetime prospect like Freddie Hernandez.

Long-Range Prognosis: Margarito will get his license back in the United States and maybe gain back an alphabet title, but the damage to his reputation and career is irrevocable.

JOSHUA CLOTTEY 35-2 (20)

The Good: Clottey is the sleeper in this division and that's not all bad. As he showed against Diego Corrales, Zab Judah, and Jose Luis Cruz, he's a rough, determined welterweight who will give anyone in the class a hard time. Remember how well he did against Margarito over the first half of their meeting in 2006? The guy can fight.

The Bad: Clottey has limitations that place him just below the division's elite. He's not as fast as Mosley, as strong as Cotto, or as relentless as Margarito. He does everything pretty well, but isn't the package that are the guys ranked ahead of him. Also, he can be passive and lose his concentration over the course of a long fight.

Who We Want Him To Fight Next: How about Berto? It's an excellent test for both guys. A victory by Clottey effectively closes the door to anyone rated behind him, and the styles match up very well.

Who He'll Probably Fight Next: Clottey is set to face Cotto on June 13 in a fight that could very well elevate his career or relegate him to the also-ran category, at least for the time being. It is also a chance to redeem himself after having fallen apart against Maragrigo three years ago.

Long-Range Prognosis: Clottey can remain an alphabet titleholder for about as long as he wants, provided he doesn't tangle with the very best guys in the division. In most other divisions he'd be world champ, but in this one, at this time, probably not.

ANDRE BERTO 24-0 (19)

The Good: Berto's demanding win over Luis Collazo

last time out proved Berto isn't just prodigiously gifted physically, he also has a fighter's heart. He fell behind early but made adjustments, wore Collazo down, and finished strong to take a close decision.

The Bad: Collazo hit Berto cleanly whenever he threw punches, rattled him at least twice, and made it abundantly clear that Berto is not yet a finished product, despite owning an alphabet belt. Moreover, plenty of viewers felt Collazo deserved the decision.

Who We Want Him To Fight Next: How about Judah? Despite his myriad deficiencies, he remains a top-10 guy and still flashes some of the fastest hands in the game. If Berto can get by him, it would go a long way toward putting him among the elite, and if he loses, we'd know he was never meant to get there. As a bonus, both guys are quick and have heavy hands.

Who He'll Probably Fight Next: The close call against Collazo will almost certainly convince Berto's brain trust to slow things down a bit. We expect his next fight will come against a much softer guy—someone like Said Ouali or Saul Alvarez.

Long-Range Prognosis: Berto is hungry enough and physically talented enough to hang with the very best guys in the division, winning some, losing some. We don't see

him netting the world title anytime soon or getting to the Hall of Fame some day, but he will leave his mark.