

HIGH NOON IN BOXING COMES TONIGHT AT 11:05 (EDT) READY FOR PRIME TIME

[THIRD Edition]

Boston Globe (pre-1997 Fulltext) - Boston, Mass.

Author: Marantz, Steven

Date: Apr 6, 1987

Start Page: 31

Section: SPORTS

Document Text

Hagler vs. Leonard

Middleweight title fight

LAS VEGAS - You are Marvelous Marvin Hagler, and you are chasing a phantom with dimples. He has tantalized you, teased you, goaded you, for longer than you care to remember. He never has been far away, but never quite close enough, until now. You are the middleweight champion and he is a memory with a structural defect. Or is he? You are Marvelous Marvin Hagler and you are about to wrap your hands around a curiosity with a poison tip.

You are Sugar Ray Leonard, and you are having every schoolboy's nightmare. The class bully is coming after you with two clubs and a pick. You gulp. Just yesterday, weren't you safe and comfortable behind a microphone, rich and adored and healthy? Was it something you ate? And then you remember. You are Sugar Ray Leonard, a legend and showman and athlete. For you, every schoolboy's nightmare is a dream come true.

High noon in boxing occurs at 11:05 p.m. (EDT) tonight. This event needs no further introduction. It has been building, in effect, for six years, and finally, in a 15,400-seat stadium behind Caesars Palace Hotel, it will take place.

If you are a fan, you may be approaching this 12-round middleweight title bout with equal anticipation and apprehension. It holds the promise of boxing at its highest level of skill and emotion. Both Hagler and Leonard are -- or were -- two of the best fighters ever to grace a prize ring.

But it also emanates a faint whiff of tragedy. Leonard has a surgically repaired left retina, has fought just once in five years and has never faced an opponent as large or strong as Hagler. If you are a fan, you are hoping that the worst does not happen.

This was boxing's most desirable match five years ago, when Leonard held the 154-pound title and Hagler the 160-pound, and both were thought to be at or approaching their peaks.

Tonight's match does not have the classic element of perfect timing. Hagler, 32, is past his prime, though not so far as to make him less than dangerous. Leonard, 30, not only is past his prime, he is long past definition.

The bout's credibility is based on the memory of Leonard's greatness. Its appeal is based on the bravado of Leonard's challenge, and the contrast in styles represented by the two fighters.

"They symbolize two aspects of our society," said promoter Bob Arum. "Leonard is the yuppie, Hagler is the blue-collar guy. And everybody can identify with them."

The selling is completed. The match will be boxing's richest, according to Arum, netting between \$30 million and \$40 million. Hagler stands to make \$15 million to \$20 million, Leonard \$12 million.

All that remains is for Hagler and Leonard to pull on their 10-ounce thumb- attached gloves and climb into the 20-foot ring.

What will happen?

There are three popular scenarios.

- Hagler overwhelms Leonard and scores an early stoppage. The thinking is that Leonard plans to confront Hagler, and to throw off his rhythm with counterpunching, grappling and limited but strategic movement. If Leonard fails to establish himself, he may be available for punishment. Hagler's heavy artillery may shock Leonard; a sweeping right hook might be the clincher.

- Hagler scores a stoppage in Rounds 6 through 8. Here, Leonard manages to establish himself. Hagler's forward movement is blunted, Leonard scores with counterpunches, perhaps hurting Hagler with a left hook after he steps out of the way of a sweeping but errant right. The two work laboriously to each other's body. But Hagler's right jab begins to land on Leonard's left eye, and puffing sets in. The overall pace begins to wear Leonard down. Leonard's hands drop down, and Hagler takes the opening.

- Leonard wins a decision. In this scenario, Leonard's tactics frustrate Hagler out of his rhythm. He gropes for Leonard, lunges, finds himself running into cute combinations and being tied up. A cut opens above one of Hagler's eyes. He becomes more cautious, or careless, and Leonard piles up points with a greater volume of punches. The more Hagler falls behind, the more he plays into Leonard's hands.

If you are a boxing writer, and you are hoping to write about something memorable, you try to picture Leonard winning. The unexpected is a better story.

But you know that for 11 years not even death and taxes have been as certain as Hagler. There is not enough reason to think that he won't continue to be.

If you are this boxing writer you are aware of another scenario involving doctors and hospitals. You are picking Hagler to win by a stoppage in Rounds 6 through 8, and you are hoping that the fight you see won't be the one to end boxing. marant;04/05

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Illustration

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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