



ÓSCAR VALDEZ'S TITLE SEARCH

By: Bill Dwyre *

LAS VEGAS -- As of mid-afternoon Tuesday, [ÓSCAR VALDEZ](#) knew he was fighting Saturday night in the co-main event of the [Terence Crawford - Viktor Postol](#) boxing card. What he didn't know was exactly what he was fighting for, other than a nice paycheck and another step forward in his career.

His was the [World Boxing Organization \(WBO\)](#) featherweight (126 pounds) title fight that maybe wasn't going to be a title fight. And maybe it was. With three days to go before the event at the [MGM Grand Garden Arena](#), there was a hint of Abbott and Costello and "Who's on First."

Valdez will fight [MATÍAS "La Cobrita" RUEDA](#) immediately before Crawford and Postol vie for the 140-pound WBO and [World Boxing Council \(WBC\)](#) title unification belts, and advance publicity material had listed the Valdez-Rueda bout as a title fight. Except one thing stood in the way. [VASYL LOMACHENKO](#).

Lomachenko has quickly become the [Manny Pacquiao](#) of the 126 and 130-pound divisions. When he knocked out Roman "Rocky" Martinez June 11, he became the WBO junior lightweight (130 pounds) champion. That was in his seventh professional fight. He was already the WBO's 126-pound champion. So, with a record of 6-1, the Ukrainian had become the fastest ever to win two world titles. His success was no surprise, just the speed of it. As an amateur, he had won World Championships in 2009 and 2011 and Olympic gold medals in 2008 and 2012.

His victory over Martinez presented him with a dilemma. Would he stay at 126 pounds or vacate that title and keep the 130 pound belt.

His Lithuanian manager, Egis Klimas, was at Top Rank Promotion's gym Tuesday afternoon, watching another of his fighters. He said Lomachenko was undecided, but had been given 60 days before announcing what he would do with his 126-pound title. That would take decision time into early August, and leave the Valdez-Rueda fight as a match made in Limbo.

"I don't know what will happen," Klimas said, "but I think we will likely go to the 130-pound division. More big names there."

That was just before 2 p.m.

Shortly after, Valdez was interviewed and had no idea himself. He was asked if it wasn't a tough dilemma, going into a fight not knowing exactly what was at stake.

"Not at all," he said. "I'm here to fight. I take it all very seriously. I expect a war every time I go out there. That's all I'm thinking about. I've heard a lot of things about how this will surely be a title fight, but a lot of that comes from people who really don't know.

"I just want to fight. That's all that's on my mind."

Of course, a few minutes later in the interview, Valdez said, "My dream is to become a champion."

So, Lomachenko's manager didn't know. Valdez didn't know. Presumably Rueda, himself in line to win a title by beating Valdez, didn't know.

But somebody in a high place did.

At 3:30, Bob Arum, Top Rank's chief executive, in response to a phone call, said, "It's a title fight. All set. Lomachenko is vacating to 130 pounds."

There was no desire to hear of the politics and arm-twisting that achieved that. Watch the Netflix series “House of Cards” and you’ll get the picture. This is boxing. Knowing too many details means somebody might have to kill you.

The good news is that, at least by Wednesday’s final press conference, Valdez, Rueda and even Lomachenko’s manager, Klimas, will know, and the world of boxing, like the soap opera, will keep turning.

The best part of that is that Valdez, an unbeaten 25-year-old with a 19-0 record that includes 17 knockouts, will be in a spotlight he deserves.

Like Lomachenko, he is a two-time Olympian and as popular in Mexico as he is fast-rising in his division. When he lost to Lomachenko in the semifinals of 2009 World Championships in Milan, Italy, it got him a bronze medal and made him the first from his country to get a medal in that event. When he lost to Irishman Johnny Joe Nevin in the London Olympics, in a match that would have achieved at least a bronze medal with a victory, he wanted that so badly for his country that he was devastated.

“My world fell on me that day,” Valdez said. “I thought I had won. When the fight ended, I went to my corner and looked at my trainer. He is an honest guy. He tells me when he thinks I have lost. I could see it in his face. He thought we won a bronze medal.”

Valdez had missed the opening ceremonies because he had to fight the next day. He missed the closing ceremonies “because I was too sad.” He also missed both in Beijing, for similar reasons.

“I regret that now,” he said. “You cannot be a sore loser.

He said two things really picked him up in the aftermath of that near miss at an Olympic medal in London.

“When we got back to Mexico City,” he said, “the people just lifted me. Mexicans can be tough critics, but they seemed to understand that I had done my best and they treated me so well.”

The reaction of his opponent, Nevin, after that bronze-medal match, also helped.

“He sent out a tweet,” Valdez said, “that said: ‘It is an honor to win over a future pro world champ.’”

Valdez said he will watch the Rio Olympics with great interest, “because I have friends on the boxing team who wanted to make it in 2012 and now are there.”

But first things first. He has a big fight Saturday night. It will be on the HBO Pay-Per-View telecast. A victory will mean an impressive 20-0 start as a pro.

And, oh yes. How could we forget? It is for a world title.

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*** This column was not subject to the approval of Top Rank. Any editorial usage of all or part of this column is welcome but must include credit to Bill Dwyre.**

Bill Dwyre will be writing a series of weekly columns on the Crawford vs. Postol world championship event. Bill was sports editor of The Los Angeles Times for 25 years, ending in 2006. He was a sports columnist for 9 1/2 years at The Times, ending Nov. 25 with his retirement. Boxing was among his most frequent column topics. Bill can be contacted at BillPatDwyre@gmail.com or via Twitter at @BillDwyre.

Undefeated junior welterweight champions [TERENCE "Bud" CRAWFORD](#) (28-0, 20 KOs) and "[The Iceman](#)" [VIKTOR POSTOL](#) (28-0, 12 KOs) will go mano a mano in a 12-round world title unification fight to determine the lineal king of the exciting 140 pound division. Promoted by Top Rank®, in association with Tecate, All Star Boxing and the motion picture "Hands of Stone," the Crawford vs. Postol [World Boxing Organization \(WBO\)](#) / [World Boxing Council \(WBC\)](#) / The Ring junior welterweight world championship event takes place **This Saturday! July 23**, at the [MGM Grand Garden Arena](#) in Las Vegas and will be produced and distributed live by [HBO Pay-Per-View®](#) beginning at 9:00 p.m. ET / 6:00 p.m. PT. Remaining tickets are priced at \$304, \$204, \$104, and \$54, not including applicable service fees. To charge by phone with a major credit card, call **AXS at (888) 929-7849**. Tickets are also be available for purchase at mgmgrand.com or **AXS.com** (<http://bit.ly/24ORYhs>)

The pay-per-view undercard will feature two-time Mexican Olympian and undefeated No. 1 featherweight contender [ÓSCAR VALDEZ](#) battling undefeated No. 2 world-rated contender [MATÍAS "La Cobrita" RUEDA](#) for the vacant [World Boxing Organization \(WBO\)](#) featherweight world title, former interim world champion [JOSE BENAVIDEZ, JR](#), risking his undefeated record and Top-10 world-rating, in a 10-round welterweight rumble against [FRANCISCO "Chia" SANTANA](#) and undefeated Top-10 contender **OLEKSANDR GVOZDYK** defending his NABF light heavyweight title, in a 10-round fight, against two-time world title challenger **TOMMY KARPENCY**.

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