

Quartey ready for biggest challenge

By Jack Welsh

LAS VEGAS — Well-traveled like Quartey is 2-0 in Las Vegas appearances and he'd love to complete the hat trick by winning Oscar De La Hoya's WBC welterweight crown Feb. 13 at the Thomas & Mack Center. It makes no difference to the 29-year-old pride of Accra, Ghana that De La Hoya is a minus \$3.60 favorite with Nevada's licensed bookmakers. After all, both warriors are undefeated world champions even though Quartey let his WBA 147-pound title purposely slip away to get this rich shot at boxing's mega-millionaire from Los Angeles.

Top Rank promoter Bob Arum has appropriately anointed this 12-round championship "The Challenge," in association with the Las Vegas Hilton and Mandalay Bay Resort & Casino as co-hosts. With 10,400 tickets sold a month ago on a scale of \$50 to \$800, this TVKO pay-per-view duel is a certain sell-out with 18,000 spectators expected.

IT'S SUPERSTAR CASH FOR the combatants, too. De La Hoya, launching his seventh season as a pro, is guaranteed \$10 million and Quartey is assured of \$4 million, the largest jackpot in his 10-year career. Regarding credentials, it's nearly a draw with De La Hoya at 29-0, 24 KOs and Quartey's reading 34-0-1, 29 KOs. Quartey's debut in Las Vegas was only his second American outing after fighting almost exclusively in Ghana rings since 1988. The main event was forgettable (Oct. 21, 1992) at the long-gone Sports Pavilion (4,300 seats) at Caesars Palace. Quartey was in the semi-windup opposite Stephen Barreras. The sleek African wasn't quite

spectacular, but efficient, scoring a three-round TKO to extend his knockout string to 20 consecutive.

Quartey spent the next two years in France, winning the WBA diadem June 4, 1994 with a 11th round knockout of Spain's previously unbeaten Crisanto Espana in Levallois, France. Though De La Hoya is his ultimate moment, Quartey has never dismissed the night he considers the toughest of his career.

"I'M WELL PREPARED FOR De La Hoya, but until I find out different, my trainer, Daniel Odamtten, and me feel Espana was by far the toughest opponent I've had to deal with. He was big and taller than me. Espana had an edge in reach but in the late rounds, I was able to wear him down with my jab. I don't think Oscar has met anybody with a better jab than mine."

During his conditioning in Big Bear, Calif., De La Hoya's battle plan included reviewing video tapes of Quartey's last 20 bouts. Whatever he thought of the sleek African's sixth title defense against Ralph Jones of Pittsburgh, Pa., in Las Vegas April 18, 1997, the opinion didn't go any farther than co-trainers Robert Alcazar and Gil Clancy.

Jones came to town with a gaudy 30-1, 20 KOs resume but Quartey never gave him a chance to get untracked. Quartey's combinations were outscoring Jones on a 6-1 ratio. After Jones' three trips to the canvas, referee Joe Cortez stopped the action in the fifth round.

"That's the way I'd like to beat De La Hoya but I know he's a far superior fighter than Jones. I don't like to predict knockouts, but I feel that's the only way I can win in Las Vegas. No decision. All we hope for

is the judges are fair," said the fourth world champion from Ghana, who was preceded by David Kotev



Former champ Ike Quartey

Azumah Nelson and Nanda Konadu.

"The perfect example is when Pernell Whitaker fought De La Hoya a couple of years ago in Vegas. He beat Oscar but he didn't get the decision. I know this is gonna be a bloody mess, but I can't get a decision. I gotta knock 'em out, the sooner the better." Odamtten, 40, is the only trainer Quartey has had, starting when the youngest in a family of nine brothers and 18 sisters was eight years old.

"IKE CAME FROM A ROUGH NEIGHBORHOOD in Ghana called Buko. No serious crime but a lot of fist fights in streets. Quartey had beaten up all the younger kids and later was taking on 15-year-olds. After a few mismatches, I got Ike to a gym. He had a certain native talent, but I had to show him what to do with his hands and where to

punch," Odamtten said. "It was as Quartey grew older that he suddenly showed power in his punching. Ike's brother won a silver medal at the 1960 Olympics in Rome. Ike, then at 140, made the Ghana Olympic team going to Seoul in 1988, but he didn't win a medal. He turned pro that year and won two fights in November. He had to learn how to hit the speed bag to help his timing. Once he got the leverage, he was stopping everybody. Only six of his fights have gone to a decision." Quartey's last fight before Saturday's De La Hoya bout was a title defense against Mexico's Jose Luis Lopez Oct. 17, 1997 at

Foxwoods Casino in Ledyard, Conn. Quartey seemingly had built up a large points lead with his jab and thunderous right hand, but the former WBO champion dropped Quartey in the 11th round. It apparently swayed two judges who voted the fight a majority draw.

Quartey was slated to defend against Russian-born Andrei Pestriev last February but was stricken with malaria.

"It was legitimate but the WBA said the fight would go as scheduled. It was an easy fight, but I told Ike we'd go back home and get well. The WBA took the title. Too bad. Quartey would have beaten Pestriev in

five rounds. Probably in the first round if he wanted it," Odamtten said. When the Quartey-De La Hoya original fight date of Nov. 21 was rescheduled after De La Hoya had suffered a cut left eyelid sparing last October, Quartey was destined to be 16 months without a fight. Quartey also was steaming whenever the media mentioned Oscar's wound. "I feel De La Hoya felt he wasn't ready and faked the cut to get a little time. When you see Oscar bloody, it will be real and probably early," the challenger said. "De La Hoya hasn't been tested. I'm too strong, too fast, and too skilled for Oscar."

De La Hoya, Moakler to wed

It looks as though Goldilocks has snagged the Golden Boy. Undefeated WBC welterweight champion Oscar De La Hoya will wed blonde-haired blue-eyed actress Shanna Moakler next summer, his promoter Bob Arum said. "She's a lovely girl, she'll be at the fight," Arum said Monday, referring to this week-end's bout. "They're a great couple."

Arum said he knew when the wedding would take place, but wouldn't say to protect the couple's privacy.

Arum confirmed that Moakler, a star of the cable television show "Pacific Blue," is pregnant.



The future Mrs. De La Hoya

The 1995 Miss USA's film work includes "The Wedding Singer," "Poison Ivy III" and "Love Stinks." She had numerous television and theatrical roles. De La Hoya, 26, brings a 29-0 record with 24 knockouts into the 12-round bout with Quartey, 29, who is 34-0-1 with 29 knockouts. The pay-per-view show, which will be televised begins at 9 p.m. De La Hoya vs. Quartey is the main event on a doubleheader championship card that includes Erik Morales (31-0 with 25 kayos) putting his WBC super bantamweight title on the line against contender Angel Chacon (24-2, with 14 kayos). In the main support bout former junior welterweight champ Frankie Randall meets Oba Carr in a 10-round welterweight eliminator with the winner getting the De La Hoya vs. Quartey survivor. Other televised fights include a women's four-rounder between former Playboy model Mia Rosales St. John and Amanda Skelton, and Butterbean puts his "King of the 4-rounders" thrown on the line against Pat Graham.

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