



AMIR KHAN reacts to a low blow by Terence Crawford in the sixth round of their welterweight title fight.

FRANK FRANKLIN II Associated Press

Fight night at Garden ends on a low note

Main event marred by blow below the belt; Khan can't continue, so Crawford gets win.

BY LANCE PUGMIRE

NEW YORK — An accidental low blow delivered by Terence Crawford brought a sudden ending to his welterweight title defense against Amir Khan on Saturday night at Madison Square Garden.

As Khan was writhing in pain from the sixth-round punch, his trainer, Virgil Hunter, reported that he no longer could fight, making Crawford the winner by technical knockout.

"I didn't want to send him back out there without his legs ... he was in paralyzing type of pain," Hunter said.

Crawford (35-0, 26 knockouts) knocked down Khan (33-5) in the first round on an overhand right to the top of the head. That harmed Khan's strategy to try to rack up early rounds and eke out a decision.

Instead, banged up, he absorbed more blows in the next four rounds as Crawford, ranked the No. 1 pound-for-pound fighter by The Times, delivered punches.

Khan was shaking his right hand in the third round as if he hurt that too. Then, in the sixth, Crawford sent a punch that struck below the belt, and Khan bowed in agony.

"Khan could have recovered. He had five minutes to recover. He was looking for a way out," Crawford promoter Bob Arum said. "He was looking for a place to fall. I don't think Khan wanted to continue, and the next round or two would've ended the fight anyway."

The crowd of 14,091 booed, as those who paid \$70 for the pay-per-view likely were too.

"I could tell I was breaking him down. It was just a matter of time," Crawford said. "I just took my time. I was disappointed the corner stopped the fight in that manner, but Virgil is a great coach, and he was looking out for his fighter. I know he didn't want to go out like that."

Hunter said Khan didn't object to his decision, elaborating, "If you get hit wrong in the testicles, five minutes is not enough."

In victory, Crawford called for fellow unbeaten welterweight Errol Spence Jr., the International Boxing Federation champion who fights for Arum's rival Al Haymon's Premier Boxing Champions.

But Arum unleashed a blistering post-fight tirade at Haymon, accusing him of being committed to never allowing a Crawford-Spence bout. He went as far as urging fans not to support PBC bouts.

"Spence won't fight Crawford not because of Spence, but because of Al Haymon," Arum said. "People have to realize he is ruining the sport of boxing."

"To not make a Spence fight with Crawford, which is a fight that all fight fans want, why? He only has his fighters fight in his own camp unless he gets fighters he knows his fighters can beat. ... Spence believes he will beat Crawford. Al Haymon does not believe."

In the co-main event, Teofimo Lopez remained in quite the hurry to become a world champion.

"I'm moving on to the main stage," Lopez (13-0, 11 knockouts) said after knocking out his fifth foe in five bouts at the Garden by finishing Finland's Edis Tatli 1 minute 32 seconds into the fifth round.

Lopez maintained pressure and delivered a hard right to the gut that caused Tatli to crumble to his knees on the canvas, and he failed to stand by the count of 10.

The victory moves Lopez to that main event he wants in July, when he's expected to challenge IBF champion Richard Commey.

Earlier, Shakur Stevenson stepped up in class impressively by overwhelming recent 130-pound title challenger Christopher Diaz by scores of 100-90, 99-91, 98-92 in a featherweight bout.

Stevenson, a 2016 U.S. Olympic silver medalist who occasionally spars with his close friend Crawford, showed the benefits of that work by complementing his gifted hand speed by fighting inside at times with Diaz. Stevenson (11-0) peppered Diaz (24-2) and rattled his head with a combination in the fifth, then buckled his knees with a left to the head in the sixth.

"He's a great fighter, but I came in there to outbox him, and that's exactly what I did," Stevenson said.

Garcia dominates in KO victory

He easily puts away Granados in seven rounds as he climbs welterweight ladder.

BY MANOUK AKOPYAN

Danny Garcia had everything to lose and very little to gain by fighting journeyman challenger Adrian Granados. If he put on a prominent performance, he simply was supposed to. If he lost a step in the ring—or, even worse, the fight—the 31-year-old would have further dropped down the rung of the stacked 147-division and lost his A-side appeal.

On Saturday, Garcia displayed the dominant performance he had promised throughout training camp by knocking down Granados three times en route to a seventh-round knockout at Dignity Health Sports Park.

"It feels great to make a statement. I did what no other fighter could do, and that's to

knock him out," Garcia said. "I stopped him, but it didn't feel easy. It was a challenge. He's a tough cookie. I knew eventually if I put it on him, they would stop it."

Garcia knocked down Granados twice in Round 2 and once in the fifth round and finished his night with a flurry of punches in the seventh. Referee Thomas Taylor had seen Granados take enough punishment and stopped the fight midway through the round.

Garcia landed an average of 23 of 69 punches per round, compared with 11 of 59 for Granados, according to the CompuBox punch-tracking system. He totaled 159 for the fight—125 of them power punches. Granados connected with 79 total punches.

The former two-division champion, who improved to 35-2, 21 knockouts, came into the fight dropping two of his last three bouts in razor-thin decisions. Garcia's urgency for stopping a losing stretch was as clear as day at the outdoor venue in which he was

fighting in. A game Granados (21-6-2, 14 knockouts) attempted to play the spoiler, but his efforts ultimately fell short to a superior counterpart who outmuscled him throughout the fight.

"He was very sharp in the exchanges. That's where he was catching me. I knew that's what I had to avoid," said Granados. "I had a plan to go the whole fight and they stopped me on my feet."

Granados previously had dropped close decisions to Shawn Porter and Adrien Broner in a nine-month span in 2017. There was clearly a talent deficiency as the Mexican by way of Chicago tried trading as best as he could but got caught with a Garcia left hook that put him down midway in Round 2. Then, a right hook seated him again toward the end of the round, but the bell saved him.

"I've said it before, when Danny Garcia is at his best, nobody can beat him," Garcia said. "I had gotten a little comfortable in the past, but I put my 110 percent into this fight

and when I do, I beat everyone."

Several of Garcia's trademark left hooks landed at will throughout the fight. He complemented his onslaught with combinations in Round 3 that drew blood from the nose of Granados.

The undercard featured heavyweight title challenger Andy Ruiz (32-1, 21 knockouts) of Imperial, Calif., beating Russian veteran Alexander Dimitrenko (41-5, 26 knockouts) in the co-main event. Ruiz dominated throughout with faster hands and superior power, and the bout was stopped after the fifth round upon advice of Dimitrenko's corner.

In another undercard fight, Brandon Figueroa (19-0, 14 knockouts), the younger brother of Omar Figueroa, outworked and battered Yonfrez Parejo (22-4-1, 11 knockouts) for eight straight rounds to win the World Boxing Assn. interim super-bantamweight belt. The Venezuelan quit on his stool before beginning the ninth round.

Vela is LAFC's undisputed leader on and off the field

KEVIN BAXTER
ON SOCCER

Herculez Gomez has been following the career of Carlos Vela since summer 2007 when both men made their national team debuts, Gomez for the U.S. and Vela, then a teenager, with Mexico.

In all that time, Gomez, now a soccer analyst for ESPN, has uncovered one existential truth.

"With Carlos, it's about him being happy," he said. "When you look at his history with his playing career and his relationship with the media, when he's most successful on the field is when he's been happy off the field."

Vela was decidedly unhappy Friday, waking to make an early morning phone call to cancel a scheduled interview. The LAFC team he captains had lost for the first time this year two days earlier, falling to 6-1-1, and he had no appetite to talk about his start to the MLS season, one that sent him into the weekend leading the league in goals (eight) and assists (five).

The incident speaks volumes about Vela, 30, and the leader he has become. The 1-0 loss Wednesday night in Vancouver wasn't his fault; he had played well, nearly stealing a game-tying score in the closing minutes. But the team—his team—had lost, so there was nothing to celebrate in his personal performance.

The interviews would have to wait until after Sunday's home game with the Seattle Sounders (5-0-1), the last remaining unbeaten team in MLS.

"There are different ways to lead. Everyone's personal

leadership style needs to be genuine to that person," said John Thorington, LAFC's executive vice president of soccer operations. "The genuine leadership style from Carlos, he's our best player, right? But what engenders him to the group is his humility."

"He is so incredibly talented, but he doesn't want to be treated as though he's incredibly talented. He just wants to be treated as one of the guys. The message that sends all throughout our roster is a really positive one."

It's one of the reasons Thorington signed Vela in summer 2017 and made him the foundation of a fledgling franchise.

"There were a lot of criteria that went into the decision," Thorington said. "Obviously, the on-field characteristics were important. What always struck us about Carlos was why he wanted to come to L.A. It directly aligned with what we wanted from our first designated player."

"He was very motivated to do something different and special and impactful in the community and the city and the league. That was the perfect marriage of what we were hoping for. We continue to reap the rewards of that."

Rewards such as 22 goals and 18 assists in 36 games over the last two seasons. A playoff appearance and MVP nomination in his first season— for which he was well-compensated with a \$6.29-million salary that ranked third in the league last season.

"He's without a doubt shown he's one of the best in the league. Probably at the moment the top three in the league with Zlatan [Ibrahi-



CARLOS VELA, front, battles FC Cincinnati's Victor Ulloa during LAFC's 2-0 win April 13. Vela has eight goals and five assists in helping his team start 6-1-1.

movie] and [Wayne] Rooney," Gomez said. "It's been fun to watch."

There's a darker side to Vela, one that also fits LAFC. To the world outside the locker room, he can be moody and aloof. Angry about a six-month suspension from the Mexican national team following the 2010 World Cup, he refused to play for his country for three years, declining call-ups for the 2012 Olympics and 2014 World Cup.

Near the end of his six-year stint with Real Sociedad in Spain, he missed training for two days for what he said was an illness, only to have photographs

surface on social media showing him at a concert in Madrid, which earned him a benching and a fine.

"One of the things that LAFC has going for it is this cool swag demeanor where it's almost good to be bad," Gomez said. "It's black. It's sleek. It's very Hollywood."

"When you get Carlos Vela, you no doubt get one of the more talented players—in my opinion, the most talented player—in the Mexican pool. But you kind of get a rogue, a renegade. And I think that's very much LAFC."

What LAFC might not be getting is Vela at his best, which is more a testament

to his past than a criticism of his present. In his third season in San Sebastian, Vela had a career-high 16 goals and 12 assists in 37 matches, making him the only player in the Spanish league with a dozen of each.

That was also where he met his wife, Saioa Canibano, a former journalist and the mother of the couple's 2½-year-old son, Romeo.

"There were only two players that stood out over Carlos Vela. That was Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi," Gomez said. "He was the man there."

Now he's the man here, leading by example and

persuasion. On LAFC's commercial flights, he'll trade in his aisle seat for a cramped middle one if it gets him in a row with a teammate. And on the pitch, he chides and consoles but rarely loses control.

"He makes everybody like him. He's never going to be in your face yelling at you," forward Christian Ramirez said. "We'll go as far as he takes us. He knows that. That's something that he's accepted."

Vela has also proven the perfect talisman for coach Bob Bradley's complicated, pressing style, and the two have bonded. Vela appreciates Bradley's cerebral, no-nonsense approach to the game, and the coach has reciprocated by challenging Vela to get even better, constantly comparing him to Messi, perhaps the greatest player of all time.

"There's two guys I've shown Messi clips to and said, 'Look, this can be you,'" Bradley said. "Carlos and Mohamed Salah. And I think I'm right in both of my choices."

But the coach has also rewarded Vela with the captain's armband and by giving him space to be himself away from the field. And that has brought out the most important emotion in Vela.

"In Los Angeles, he's found a place where's extremely happy," Gomez said. "No one's ever questioned Carlos Vela's talent. It's other things. Maybe that mentality: I'm not one of that group."

"I believe you can be successful and do things your own way, and he's showing that. I have not heard one negative thing about Carlos Vela yet."