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CANELO ALVAREZ, left, easily made weight Friday for the WBO light-heavyweight title fight while Sergey Kovalev, who holds the belt, needed four attempts to get down to the limit of 175 pounds.

Who's hungry? It sure doesn't look like fans are

Alvarez might have overestimated the interest in Kovalev fight

DYLAN HERNANDEZ

LAS VEGAS

— Less than half of the seats were occupied in the part of the MGM Grand Garden Arena that was open Friday afternoon. The fans who were there were noticeably lacking in enthusiasm.

The crowd was nothing like the raucous masses in front of which Canelo Alvarez typically has weighed in on days before his fights. The fans never broke into song, never chanted his name loud enough to echo throughout the venue.

The scene was alarming, considering the significance of Alvarez's showdown against light-heavyweight champion Sergey Kovalev.

This will be more than a fight. This will be a measure of Alvarez as a matchmaker.

Whether Alvarez has the right feel for deciding whom to fight, and when, will have significant consequences, not only for his legacy, but also for the sport.

As many matches are televised or streamed online these days, the sport continues to require major events to thrive.

Alvarez is about the only active fighter with the profile necessary to deliver such fights.



The burden was inherited from Floyd Mayweather Jr., a great fighter who was an even greater matchmaker. The objective of a fighter is to maximize earnings while minimizing risk, and Mayweather never lost sight of that.

The question is whether Alvarez did that by selecting Kovalev as his opponent.

The lack of enthusiasm around this fight indicates the public is skeptical of Kovalev's chances. With Alvarez moving up two divisions from his optimal fighting weight of 160 pounds, however, Kovalev has a size advantage that could present serious problems.

At 5-foot-9, Alvarez is three inches shorter than Kovalev. With this fight taking place at 175 pounds, Alvarez also will be the naturally lighter fighter.

And though he has successfully forced previous opponents to fight at close range, it's possible he never gets anywhere near Kovalev and loses by a wide margin.

In which case, Kovalev would be a low-reward, high-risk opponent, which would make him the worst possible option Alvarez could have chosen.

Then again, maybe Alvarez knows something no one else does. Maybe the perceived danger is an illusion.

At 36, Kovalev is physically diminished. He also

could be psychologically damaged, as the menacing aura that made him special was seemingly extinguished by a couple of losses to Andre Ward.

Ward revealed that Kovalev was particularly vulnerable to body punches, which are a specialty of Alvarez.

Alvarez has explained that he chose to fight Kovalev because of the opportunity to win a world title in a fourth weight class. But Kovalev wasn't the only fighter who offered him that chance. There are two other fighters who hold versions of the light-heavyweight championship, Artur Beterbiev and Dmitry Bivol.

So why did Alvarez pick Kovalev?

Kovalev has the most recognizable name, but another factor could be that Beterbiev and Bivol are undefeated.

Whatever the case, Alvarez appears to have erred in not taking a third fight with hated rival Gennady Golovkin.

The two most important fights of Alvarez's career were with Golovkin. The initial encounter was declared a draw, the second a narrow decision victory for Alvarez.

The consensus was that neither fighter did enough to separate himself from the other.

Golovkin, now 37, fought last month against Sergiy

Derevyanchenko. He was awarded a close decision, but looked his age. The ageless Golovkin became old overnight.

Alvarez would have triumphed easily against that version of Golovkin. He could have been credited with sending Golovkin toward retirement.

Instead, the way in which his rivalry with Golovkin has played out has diminished his reputation. As it was, Alvarez was criticized for waiting until Golovkin was 35 to fight him. If he fights Golovkin again and wins, he won't be seen as having conquered a long-time tormentor, but as having beaten up a geriatric.

The failure to detect Golovkin's decline earlier raises questions about whether Alvarez shares Mayweather's ability to perceive barely noticeable shortcomings in his opponents that can be exploited.

The worst-case scenario is that Alvarez misjudged Kovalev.

Streaming service DAZN didn't invest \$350 million in Alvarez for him to lose the third fight of their 10-fight deal.

But the alternative is also problematic. Even if Alvarez has identified Kovalev's weaknesses and is certain he can take advantage of them, he appears to have overestimated the public's appetite for this fight.

Alvarez appears pretty at ease with moving up

Kovalev's awkward weigh-in turns focus to opponent's pursuit of, possibly, Chavez.

By **NORM FRAUENHEIM**

LAS VEGAS — Weigh-ins, like body language, are hard to interpret and often unreliable. Want to predict a fight? Get an astrologer. There are no winners.

But sometimes there are signs, and there were plenty Friday as Canelo Alvarez and Sergey Kovalev went through the formal ritual of stripping down to their shorts and stepping onto a scale in front of a few thousand people.

Alvarez looked comfortable. Kovalev did not.

It figured to be the other way around on the eve of their light-heavyweight fight Saturday night at the MGM Grand. Alvarez (52-1-2, 35 knockouts) is moving up two weight classes, from 160 pounds to 175, for the first time. He is moving into a division long occupied by Kovalev (34-3-1, 29 KOs). Yet Kovalev struggled to make weight in a scene that was part strip tease and altogether awkward.

Kovalev needed four trips to make weight. The first time he stepped onto the scale, he was a pound too heavy at 176. Off came his necklace and down went his weight, but by only a half-pound. Off went his shorts as he stepped behind a white towel and back on to the scale. Still four ounces too heavy.

He jumped back into his shorts and headed backstage. He was given an hour to shed the excess baggage. He needed six minutes. Whatever he did, it worked. Again, he stepped behind the white towel, stepped out of his shorts and onto the scale. Kovalev was at 175, not an ounce less or more.

The fight, without fines or the loss of his belt, is on (DAZN, 6 p.m.). But the weigh-in left further questions about whether Kovalev lost his chances along with the shorts. Was the struggle to make weight a sign that the 36-year-old Russian was fatigued? He had said that he had more energy because of a scaled-back training, including fewer rounds of sparring.

Kovalev, who holds the World Boxing Organization's version of the 175-pound belt, never has been given much of a chance in this fight. Alvarez, who was at a comfortable 174½ pounds, is expected to be about a 4-1 favorite at opening bell.

No matter what hap-

Alvarez vs. Kovalev

When: Tonight, 6
Where: MGM Grand Arena, Las Vegas
How to watch: DAZN
Main event: Canelo Alvarez vs. Sergey Kovalev, light-heavyweights.
Other fights: Ryan Garcia vs. Romero Duno, lightweights; Seniesa Estrada vs. Marlen Esparza, flyweights; Blair Cobbs vs. Carlos Ortiz, welterweights.

pened at the weigh-in, Alvarez still expects a difficult task at overcoming Kovalev's advantages in height and reach. For the first time, Alvarez said, he will feel the power from a fighter who is expected to outweigh him by at least 10 pounds at opening bell.

"It will be complicated," Alvarez said.

But the odds continue to favor him in his quest to make the history he has promised. He is seeking a fourth title at a fourth weight, which would be one more step toward perhaps eventually becoming the equal of Julio Cesar Chavez, who ranks as Mexico's best ever.

It was no coincidence, perhaps, that Chavez showed up Friday and talked to reporters before the weigh-in. It was also inevitable that he would be asked whether Alvarez supplants him if the 29-year-old takes Kovalev's belt.

"Bull..." Chavez said.

He was joking. Kind of. "Truthfully, I don't know," he said. "I think Mexico has had great world champions. The best Mexican fighter isn't based in titles. There are Mexicans who have world championships, but that's not why they will be the best Mexican fighter of all time."

Chavez was asked if Alvarez is, in fact, chasing him.

"No, no, why would he be talking about me?" he said. "... Just because Canelo's fighting right now doesn't make him the best of all time. He could win five or six world championships, but that won't make him the greatest Mexican fighter of all time."

"He's a great fighter, but to say he's the best of all time... It's hard to choose one. The champions of the past, Salvador Sanchez, Jose Napoles, [Carlos] Zarate, Ruben Oliveras, a great fighter. Mexico has had a lot of great fighters."

That's the historical scale. Alvarez is trying to move up on that one too.

Diaz, Masvidal eager to wage war against each other

UFC 244 combatants are expected to pose a fierce challenge in the welterweight clash.

By **MANOUK AKOPYAN**

In case Saturday's stacked card did not indicate that UFC 244 is projecting to be a significant show, perhaps President Trump's planned visit to watch the proceedings in person will.

Trump, who's friendly with UFC President Dana White, is slated to witness the coronation of the inaugural BMF — an R-rated acronym and belt — when the temperamental Nate Diaz battles Jorge Masvidal on ESPN pay-per-view. Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson will bestow the BMF strap, which cost \$50,000 just to make, immediately after the main event fight at Madison Square Garden in New York.

Neither of the fierce headliners sports a pristine record, but Diaz (21-11), a longtime fan favorite and former conqueror of Conor McGregor, and Masvidal (34-13), a resurrected fighter, guarantee to wage a war in the cage.

"This is the best fighter in the game right here," Diaz said. "So that's the one I'm

fighting for. And no matter for the belt or what. Anytime you fight me, it's going to be the best, baddest ... fight you're going to see, with the best ... fighters."

Diaz, a well-rounded Brazilian jujitsu black belt, returned to the cage after a self-imposed, three-year sabbatical in August to defeat Anthony Pettis in Anaheim.

"I figure he might try to run out and take me out," Diaz said. "But I'm expecting it all. He's a strategic fighter, been around forever and you're not just there because you're there."

Masvidal, a onetime street fighter who's coming off a five-second knockout of Ben Askren, the fastest in UFC history, is planning to display another dazzling performance against Diaz, who's been knocked out only once in his career.

"The only thing I'm trying to do is take this guy out of consciousness for a while," Masvidal said. "I just want to turn the lights off on somebody, and that's all I want to do. That's the only way to create headlines in my sport and get the biggest paychecks possible. That's my job. That's entertainment. That's the only way I can get the bills paid."

The co-headlining bout will feature middleweights Darren Till and Kelvin



GREGORY PAYAN/Associated Press

JORGE MASVIDAL, left, and Nate Diaz engage in a staring contest as executive Dana White looks on at a news conference for UFC 244 on Sept. 19 in New York.

Gastelum, who is returning from a loss in a fight of the year front-runner against since-turned champion Israel Adesanya.

Rounding out the PPV part of the event will be Stephen Thompson versus Vicente Luque, Derrick Lewis versus Blagoy Ivanov and Kevin Lee versus Gregor Gillespie.

The preliminary portion and broadcast on ESPN2 will feature Edmen Shahbazyan, an undefeated, 21-year-old touted phenom

who was born in Los Angeles and lives and trains in Glendale.

The Armenian fighter and UFC's No. 13 ranked middleweight will take on the toughest test of his young career in Brad Tavares as he looks to make a mark in the sport and prove his promise as an elite up-and-comer.

Shahbazyan (10-0), who's trained out of the Glendale Fighting Club alongside stablemate Ronda Rousey ever since he picked up the

sport as a preteen, wants a statement win against Tavares (17-5) to carve a path at his own shot at history.

"I'm improving with every fight and plan to put on a show and get the victory against Brad," Shahbazyan said. "I'm motivated, hungry, prepared and it's going to be an amazing night. I want to build myself to top-contender status and then the youngest champion in UFC history."

Shahbazyan still has over

20 months for a chance to break light-heavyweight champion Jon Jones' record (23 years, 8 months, 1 day) and be the UFC's quickest crownholder.

To jump on the fast track, the "Golden Boy" signed with Rousey's management company and has continued developing his skills under lifetime trainer Edmond Tarverdyan, Rousey's coach.

"Ronda's inspired me to believe in myself and work hard for my goals," Shahbazyan said. "She's always been a mentor. It's cool to have a legend like that in my corner."

Shahbazyan's diminutive frame as a 12-year-old made him an ideal sparring partner for Rousey during the climax of her unprecedented MMA reign, and he's been in the former champion's ear ever since.

He even has a propensity for fast fights, just like Rousey.

Shahbazyan, a graduate of the Los Angeles fight scene, sports nine first-round finishes, with five wins coming inside one minute.

"We knew early on this kid has what it takes to be a great champion," Tarverdyan said. "He's mature and has dedication and heart, and he's only getting better day by day."